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THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: MODERNITY, GEOPOLITICS AND THE DEVELOPING GLOBAL ORDER

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Introduction

In March 2013, a speech was given by Chinese president Xi Jinping in Astana, Kazakhstan, initiating the strategy of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt'. In November 2013, a further speech was given by President Xi in Jakarta, Indonesia, launching 'the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. Both speeches combined marked the birth of the grand strategic vision of the fifth generation of Chinese Communist leadership. This vision is commonly referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative.

Definition of China's Belt and Road Initiative

"The Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (一带一路, or "BRI" hereafter) encompasses 66 countries across Central & Eastern Eurasia and the maritime Asia Pacific. It covers 63% of the global population and over 1/3rd of the world's GDP. It contains almost every current major world religion, and straddles six of the seven fault lines between civilizations, as envisaged by Samuel P. Huntington.

BRI is China's unilateral vision for the future structure of the greater Eurasian region. It attempts to promote infrastructure connectivity and investment through land-locked continental Eurasia, develop efficient maritime connections from the South China Sea and Africa to Western Europe, and hopes to exert China's comprehensive geo-economic, geopolitical and strategic influence in the whole region.



Figure 1 Map of the BRI

In 2015, a book entitled *One Belt One Road, China’s Top National Strategy* was published with an official endorsement, signalling that the BRI had become China’s overriding National Strategy. I equate China’s BRI to the Grand Strategy of the U.S. post-WWII in its international significance and objectives. The U.S. over this period of time established multilateral financial institutions including the IMF and the World Bank, and supranational institutions including the United Nations. It initiated the Marshall Plan to promote regional economic growth, NATO as the regional security framework, and the Bretton Woods

Table 1 BRI’s Regional institutions in comparison to the current global mechanisms

Multilateral institutional mechanism	BRI region	Global order
Regional Trade Integration	16 + 1	WTO
	Regional Comprehensive Economic partnership	European Union
	ASEAN + 3	
	BRI Economic Corridor	
Regional Financial Integration	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	The World Bank
	Silk Road Fund	
	New Development Bank	
Regional Military Security Organization Lender of Last Resort and Supranational Organization	Shanghai Cooperation Organization	NATO
	To be developed	IMF
		United Nations

system to establish the U.S. Dollar-standard for the global monetary system. China has built a comparable multilateral regional framework over this period, very similar to the grand strategy of the U.S. post-WWII.

There has been much speculation about the total scale of investment under China's BRI. Popular estimates range from \$1 trillion to \$8 trillion¹ across the established multilateral investment platforms and debt financing through China's policy banks, including the China Development Bank and EXIM Bank.

China's BRI works in coordination with President Xi's Two 'One Hundred Year Plans'. The first One Hundred Year Plan is that by 2021, upon the centennial anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, China should reach the living standards of the poorer countries in Europe. The other is that by 2049, China should attain 'modernity', and be among the greatest nations of the world. The Belt and Road Initiative will serve as China's transitory grand strategy between 2013 and around 2050. If BRI were executed successfully over the coming three decades, China's ultimate grand strategy by 2050 would be to assert a Chinese version of a global order. Just as the Post-WWII grand strategy of the U.S. served as the means for the ultimate foreign policy objective of Pax-Americana, BRI is China's grand strategy, but not the end in itself of China's grand strategy, rather a means to its ultimate end, i.e. Pax-Sinica.

Deconstruction of China's BRI

1) *The BRI is about economics, but not simply about economics.*

President Xi Jinping's BRI was postulated as a two-pronged vision. One is the Modernization Vision, and the other, the Common Destiny Vision. The first one is clearly economic, and the latter, political.

The Modernization Vision, in Xi's own words, is for regional countries to 'jump onto China's economic high-speed rail'. To paraphrase the jargon, BRI countries will participate in China's economic prosperity through infrastructure development and infrastructure investments made possible by China.

The Common Destiny Vision, in President Xi's own articulations, is for regional countries to build a 'Community of Common Destiny'.² During

his speech in Davos in 2017, Xi's regional vision further transcended to a grander 'Common Destiny as Humankind'.³ This vision captivates a high moral ideal and invites much more complex dialogues than simple understanding of the BRI as a common economic policy prescription for the region. A 'community of common destiny' elevates the BRI to similar strategic significance as the Manifest Destiny, a founding principle of U.S. foreign policy. The declaration of China's vision of a global destiny has essentially promulgated China's quest for its own version of a world order.

2) The success of the BRI is contingent upon the cohesion and integrity of the achievement of both visions in its entirety.

The modernization vision

Infrastructure investments and the long-term accessibility to financing which China provides will have a positive effect on the BRI countries' economic growth, and therefore enhance the living standards of BRI countries. This is largely in accordance with developmental economics. It should be stressed that development is taking place both in heavy infrastructure, such as railways and highways, and also digital communications and the internet. It has become clear that dollar-for-dollar, investments in modern communications technology have a far greater return than from money invested in traditional infrastructure developments, such as railways and highways. The telecom infrastructure networks led by Huawei and ZTE are currently expanding rapidly through the BRI region. Further, China's success in setting and leading the global telecommunications standards particularly in 5G will be more fundamental in shaping economic development patterns of the region than the expansion of physical infrastructures over a wide geographical scale.

The common destiny vision

What are the geopolitical implications for the region with the modernization of the countries along the BRI? The answer to this question is essentially a revival of the decades-long debate that started with political scientist Seymour Lipset. Lipset tested the causal relationship between a country's economic development and its political openness.⁴ He further advanced the conclusion that democracy is the outcome of economic development. This 'Modernization–Democratization' concept has since been tested, retested, and contested, and generated a large number of political analyses in the field over the past few decades. It is significant in understanding the future direction of the BRI region as regional countries go through economic modernization supported by China.

If Lipset, his followers including former President Bill Clinton, and the believers in the Washington Consensus were right, BRI countries would have a tendency to become democracies as they economically develop. These countries would then naturally be inclined to align themselves with countries of the West, believe in Western values and, for all practical purposes become part of the West. Therefore, despite the development of the BRI, there would be no common destiny between China and the 65 regional BRI countries as they carried on their course of economic development. Further, democracy would be revealed as the common destiny of these economically developed nations. This is certainly not the desired outcome of Xi's vision. However, empirical analysis drawn on economic data from the World Bank and political data from the EIU Global Democracy Ranking suggests that as the BRI regional countries develop economically, there is no significant tendency for them to turn towards liberal democracy, and that Lipset's hypothesis does not reflect the practical reality in these circumstances.⁵ This may be disappointing to the liberal West. However, this tendency makes Xi's Common Destiny vision possible. Therefore, the achievement of both the Chinese economic and political visions of the BRI becomes feasible.

3) The success of the BRI is predicated upon the continued success of the China Model and the political preferences of the countries in the region.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's global democracy rankings 2015, of the 66 countries in the BRI region, two countries are full democracies, i.e. the Czech Republic and New Zealand. There 24 'flawed democracies', including countries in Southern Europe and in South Asia. There are 17 hybrid regimes, including Singapore, Turkey, and various ASEAN countries, and Iraq; and 23 authoritarian regimes, including the Gulf countries, Central Asian countries, and countries in North Africa.

The China Model is essentially built upon political authoritarianism and a certain degree of economic liberalization, selected privatization and limited industry deregulation, often classified as authoritarian capitalism. Due to the natural political profile of the BRI region being predominantly quasi-democracies, failed democracies and autocracies, the China Model would allow these countries to develop economically, while still maintaining tight political control by the people in power. When faced with a dire need for economic development, regional countries are offered a choice between the China Model, and the Washington Consensus

model. With their governments having little desire to forego their authoritarian powers, many of these countries would opt to choose China as a viable partner, sometimes even a preferred partner, in their development process. The diverse backgrounds of authoritarian regimes and the lack of full liberal democracy in the BRI region essentially provides China with the political incubator to expand its model of authoritarian capitalism. Therefore, the success and sustainability of the economic strategy of the BRI is essentially a competition over economic effectiveness and efficiency delivered between market authoritarianism and market liberalism, or the competition between the China Model and the Washington Consensus model. The success and sustainability are externally predicated upon the choices made by countries in the region based on their unique political economic preferences.

The political philosophical foundations of Xi's BRI 'Common destiny'

There is a clear set of common destinies that belong to the West, including liberal democracy, market liberalism and civil liberties. The Chinese-positated Common Destiny, by contrast, can only be drawn from a rich repository of Chinese history and its successive civilizations.

Absolute sovereignty and authoritarianism mandated by Confucius

Post-Westphalia, the concept of modern sovereignty was born.⁶ However, the power of sovereigns was never absolute in Europe.⁷ A king's sovereign power in Europe was bound either by the power of the aristocracy, or by the power of divinity. Sovereigns were dependent on the aristocrats for their military forces, and often times, for their very existence.

Chinese feudal history started earlier and lasted longer than European nation-states. The power of the sovereigns in China was never bound by the power of the aristocracy. In 211 BC, Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, invented a civil service selection system run on meritocracy that remained virtually unchanged throughout Chinese history. In many ways, it is still used today.⁸ The civil service apparatus was organized hierarchically, which ended with the emperor himself. The complex selection system was exercised through a national exam, and civil servants were selected based on merit. Because the mandarin positions were not inheritable, the emperors were left with absolute power with no prospect of sabotage from his aristocrats.

In the West, the role of religion was another major hedge on the absolute power of the sovereigns. The Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church both sought to unite nation-states in Europe under a single authority, a form of Imperium Christianum. This culminated in the Thirty Years' War which resulted in the concession of power by both the Empire and the Church to the power of the Sovereigns.

Chinese sovereignty on the other hand, was never bound by the power of religion. The most dominant religions, Buddhism and Confucianism,⁹ did not provide a means to check the exercise of political authority. Buddhism originated from a set of psychological and ontological assumptions totally unlike those of modern Western thought. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism defines the enlightenment of the individual by the very denial of his ontological existence. A consequence of Buddhist belief is that the very rights that are intrinsically attached to the very existence of an individual from the Western viewpoint – individual liberty and civil rights, core beliefs of Western liberalism – are not acknowledged as being valid.

Confucianism supported a moral code of civil obedience, from the inferior to the superior, and all the way to the Emperor, the 'Son of Heaven'. This created a hierarchical system that paid respects and tributes to the elder, the superior and the higher authority. Confucianism does not challenge the supreme power of the sovereign. The power of the sovereign was bound by no religion, but by the Mandate of Heaven, or indeed, from another and perhaps truer viewpoint of the same idea, by his own moral limitations. In other words, even though Confucius did not endorse despotism, Confucianism did endorse authoritarianism.¹⁰

The Confucian view of world order: 'All Under Heaven' constructed on political heterogeneity

The Community of Common Destiny is an attempt by China to reestablish in the modern age a Chinese version of a global order. The first vision China offered was 'All Under Heaven' (天下), which dated back to at least the Qin Dynasty (second century BC), if not earlier. 'All Under Heaven' was a state-based tributary system of organizing the world order. It was run on two core beliefs. One belief was that China was the cultural centre of the world. The second belief was a consequence of the first, that all foreign rulers were expected to recognize the prominence and superiority of China.¹¹

Contrary to the Western practice of colonialism, by which colonial powers conquered and ruled the inferior nations by hard power, the tributary system of imperial China was about recognizing China's superior cultural power, and thus that China ruled the tributary states by its soft power. In the 1420s, when Chinese navigator Zheng Ho sailed along what is today the Maritime Silk Road, he simply demanded that locals should kowtow to the scrolls of the Son of Heaven [the Chinese Emperor], and brought back exotic animals as tributes to the Ming court. Otherwise, these countries were left intact.

Other than the system of 'All under Heaven', Confucianism also defines the relationship between harmony and uniformity. In the Analects, it is stated, 'noble men aim at harmony, but not at uniformity. Little men aim at uniformity, but not at harmony'.¹² (君子和而不同, 小人同而不和). A Chinese approach places a priority on harmony over uniformity. China's modern foreign policy affirms that China is adaptable in working with autocracies, theocracies, democracies and authoritarian states without placing ideological biases. 'All Under Heaven' is the belief that every nation state, as an independent actor, can come under China's economic and cultural sphere without having to become homogenous on political and ideological grounds.

Western liberalism posits the exact moral contrary. The value priority is placed on uniformity, not harmony. The concept of Democratic Peace, which can be traced back to Kant, states that democracies are not likely to go to war with other democracies. It is the ideological uniformity that is essential to peace. Countries that are not in uniformity cannot be trusted, and therefore are more likely to go to war with each other. U.S. Wilsonianism, a dominant school of Twentieth Century international relations, is a reflection of the global effort to create uniformity across nations, based on the image of the U.S.

China's market authoritarianism

The 'Beijing Consensus', a term coined by Joshua Cooper Ramo, was framed as a theoretical and pragmatic economic and social model based on the speed and scale of China's economic growth, and China's political unpredictability.¹³ Despite this coinage, there is by no means a clearly articulated set of economic policies from Beijing as an antithesis to the 'Washington Consensus'.¹⁴ In a way, the truth behind the 'Beijing Consensus' is that there has been no Beijing consensus.

However, China has beyond doubt embraced an alternative path of economic development from the economic commandments of the ‘Washington Consensus’. With it, China adopts a very different social and political superstructure that ensures the efficiency and stability of its economic model thus far. This in totality presents a formidable ‘China Model’.

There has been certainly a resurgence in the weight and role of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in the Chinese economy during Xi’s reign. Mergers of major state-owned companies to create colossal Chinese enterprises in key economic sectors have occurred more frequently, making it extremely difficult for private companies to compete in key economic sectors with the SOEs. BRI projects, mostly situated in emerging economies, are inherently imbedded with varying degrees of political and economic risks. State-Owned enterprises, with a large amount of financial backing from the state, and their majority ownership being the state (unlike private enterprises), can represent Chinese state strategic interests in many ways, and secure a much bigger share of BRI investments than their private company counterparts.

Should the China Model be seen as economically successful, and at the same time non-ideological and non-interventionist, many countries along the BRI region, especially the quasi-democracies and autocracies, would welcome it as an alternative, maybe as a preferred alternative to satisfy their desire for economic growth without compromising on political authority.¹⁵ Thus regional countries with a dire need for economic growth will be left to choose one of two alternatives: market liberalism or market authoritarianism models.

In conclusion, under the Chinese ‘Common Destiny’ vision, the region will likely tend towards national sovereignty over individual liberty, market authoritarianism over market liberalism, political authoritarianism over democracy, and civil obedience over civil liberty. Just as democracy, market liberalism and civil liberty define the common destiny of the West, the common destiny China envisions can be defined as nationalism, market authoritarianism and rule by civil obedience.

Implications for the transforming global order

1) The Return of Mackinder’s Eurasian Heartland Pivot

The BRI encompasses two principal groups of routes: the continental routes and the maritime routes.

The game changer is most likely to happen in continental Eurasia. The U.S. has not been a major Eurasian continental power, especially in the Eurasian heartland, either during the Cold War or post the Cold War, either economically or ideologically. The U.S. had a military stronghold in Afghanistan during the War in Afghanistan. Since the military pullback from Afghanistan, the U.S. has volunteered to forsake its strategic position in the Eurasian heartland. Meanwhile, China's infrastructure investment initiative will create new continental economic efficiencies, open borders and intra-regional trade. Given all considerations, China's economic integration efforts in the region could potentially recalibrate the balance of power on the Eurasian continent.

In the Maritime Asia-Pacific region, the power status quo will remain intact for the foreseeable future. China will largely embrace a more defensive posture. All the island disputes will remain a security issue and will get resolved one way or another, at least in the view of Henry Kissinger.¹⁶ The U.S. has indisputable military superiority in maritime Asia, and China stays a second, but a rising second. China should understand fully that even with a potential challenge to U.S. hegemony, it is not likely to bring about a change to U.S. hegemony.

The rivalry over the Eurasian Heartland marks a historical return of Mackinder's Heartland theory from his celebrated article on the 'Geographical Pivot of History'.¹⁷ In 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder famously argued that much of the Eurasian heartland, today large parts of Russia and Central Asia, was the key to global balance of power. In Mackinder's conception,¹⁸ whoever rules East Europe commands the Heartland; whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; and whoever rules the World-Island commands the world.

The Eurasian heartland remains the world's geopolitical pivot, an idea as true a hundred years ago as it is today. The Eurasian heartland is the BRI's birthplace, a necessary corridor for the Chinese-envisioned new continental economic reality, and the foundation of a Chinese-initiated regional security pact, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

2) The Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine

In 2014, Chinese president Xi claimed that 'Asian affairs should be handled by Asians',¹⁹ essentially an Asian version of the 'Monroe Doctrine'. There were two main implications to this statement. First, the Monroe Doctrine was defensive in nature. Although the rhetoric of the

Asian version may sound provocative, the intention is likewise not aggressive. Two, with the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. claimed its de facto leadership of the Americas. China sees itself in similar capacity in Asia Pacific with its proclamation of the Asian Version as well.

3) *Structural transfer of power between the maritime and continental forces of world's geography*

Mackinder also famously defined the two forces of world's geography: the continental 'inner crescent' of Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia; and the oceanic 'outer crescent' of the Americas, Britain, South Africa, Australasia and Japan.²⁰ Over the immediate past six centuries, the outer crescent has risen to dominate the world. Prior to the emergence of naval powers, the inner crescent had dominated the world's power-play for over two millennia or longer.

Human ingenuity precipitates the natural courses of history.²¹ Naval strength has enabled faster and wider global trade through sea than on land, which gave rise to the outer crescent powers. Today, China's railway and telecommunications infrastructure development expertise is fast progressing to a level of efficiency that can fundamentally transfer global power gravity from sea back to land.

The BRI is circumstantial in a sense that China happens to be the largest economy in greater Eurasia at this particular juncture in history. But there is also something more structural, and more historically natural about it, which is the transfer of the world's power gravity between land and sea, or between the inner crescent and the outer crescent.

This competition over the Eurasian heartland is fundamentally a structural transfer of power between the political forces of the land-based authoritarian states and those of the sea-based democratic states. At the heart of this geopolitical rivalry, there lies the geo-economic competition over the efficiency of global trade and investment via land and sea routes. When the economic and trade realities change, so changes the world's geopolitical reality.

4) *A spherical view of future global order*

We often in policy discourse refer to a U.S.-led global order and China's quest for a China-centric global order. The implications to the future global order go deeper than semantics. The Western understanding of global order is one in linearity, with the global hegemon leading from

the top. The second largest power in the linear order is inherently a threat to the hegemon. This 'Thucydides Trap'²² thus becomes a highly probable event as the aspiring challenger continues to rise. All other major powers in this order are also lined up in a linear hierarchy. They inherently compete with one another, but also cooperate to uphold the integrity of the systems and the original political philosophical foundations of which this linear world order is composed. In this linear global order, the underlying intrinsic values of the nation states remain homogenous across all member nations. Competition defines the relative positions of the nation states, but does not pose a challenge to the homogeneity of the common pursuit of the West.

The Chinese-positing notion of a community of Common destiny, if it were to come to pass, would be a revival of the ancient notion of 'All Under Heaven'. It is a spherical global order with China at its centre. Contrary to the Western order in linearity, the Chinese view of a global order involves a centre and peripheral nations in a spherical formation. In this spherical global order, political and value homogeneity are not required. Unlike in the linear order where every nation has the potential to become the next hegemon, in the spherical order, it takes one nation to become the centre and no other nation is believed to have the characteristics and quality to replace the centre and to behave in the same capacity. There is not a second centre in the spherical global order, nor is there a challenger to the centre; therefore the preconditions for a Thucydides Trap do not exist in this order. The role of the centre nation is not to lead, but to stabilize the order. The centre does not strive to form allies and friends, and contain aliens and foes among the peripheral nations. All peripheral nations are viewed with no ideological bias. The centre stays as a lonely power demanding its superior nation-state status and respect by all the peripheral nations. This spherical global order reduces power competitions made in pursuit of hegemony imbedded in the linear global order. It builds a whole new understanding of the structure and mechanisms of a global institutional framework that is based on political heterogeneity. In the coming three decades, the linear global order led by the US and the spherical global order posited by China will need to find a way to sit alongside each other as the future global order morphs into its new form.

5) The BRI is China's all-in geopolitical means towards its end pursuit of a Pax-Sinica

Countries tend to follow more hefty ideals than hard power dominance. The Pax-Americana is a living example of global peace and order

ensured through a combination of hard power and soft power of the hegemon. As discussed, one fundamental premise of the ancient ‘All Under Heaven’ was the recognition of China’s cultural superiority, or China’s soft power. It equally applies in the modern Chinese concept of global order. China has not yet formulated the soft power in the field of ideas, a set of values that is inspiring enough for the rest of the world to follow. Before China defines its ideas through which it hopes to yield its soft power, China will continue to use its hard economic power to expand its regional economic and geopolitical influence, and establish practical global institutional frameworks to propel its multilateral agenda. The prevalence of political and economic illiberalism in the region provides the perfect incubator for the spread of China’s unique political economic model and success of its geopolitical quest. The BRI will be China’s all-in means to achieve its ultimate foreign policy end, the establishment of a Chinese version of global order based on a combination of China’s hard economic and military powers and soft power of the ideas through to the midpoint of the 21st Century.

Over the coming decades, from a political philosophical perspective, the world will continue to see a clash between the Jeffersonian egalitarian liberalism, and competitive visions of global common destinies between ‘beacon on the hill’ and ‘all under heaven’.

Conclusion

We are likely to see a paradigm shift in the world order in the coming decades, centred around The BRI as China’s signature foreign policy.

The BRI aims to achieve both an economic vision and a political vision. With China providing infrastructure investment and infrastructure development expertise to regional countries, it would help regional countries develop economically, or to share China’s economic prosperity. As these countries develop economically, on account of the unique political profile of the region being predominantly failed democracies, quasi-democracies and autocracies, these countries will not exhibit a significant tendency to lean towards full liberal democracy. The fact that they won’t fall into the Western camp as they economically develop provides China with an opportunity to realize its second BRI vision, to form a community of common destiny with the regional countries. The common destiny China posits would be drawn from a fusion of Chinese ancient philosophy and its modern political ideology. It would

be composed of elements including authoritarianism, nationalism and rule by civil obedience. The success and survivability of the BRI is contingent upon China's continued ability to succeed with its China Model, its ability to protect its massive amount of asset ownership overseas and the unique political preferences of countries in the region.

Stephen Halper said, 'China's greatest fear is American ideas'.²³ It is equally true that America's greatest fear should be China's ideas. Before China masters the power of its own ideas, China's economic interest in the region will inevitably be protected and secured by its rising military strength. China is left with virtually no other means to ensure its regional economic interests beyond its borders, other than the ready use of security means, as the recipients of China's infrastructure investments include many illiberal and unpredictable regimes, which lack transparency and legal safeguards.

The BRI in the coming decades will be China's most significant foreign policy objective in the most strategic region in establishing its global power, due to both the region's geographical proximity to China and regional countries' political economic preferences. It is crucial for the West to engage with this grand strategic concept of China's version of a global destiny through a deliberate set of policy choices including selective engagement, selective rejection, selective competition and selective accommodation.

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