

Globalization, Colonialism and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an umbrella term for China's plans to re-establish both the overland Silk Route Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route. It has gained the support of over 100 countries and international organizations and until now, more than 40 of them have signed cooperation agreements with China. Although BRI is an open, diversified and win-win project poised to bring huge opportunities for the development of China and many other countries, to a certain level, it has been seen by some economists, scholars, political and academic pundits as a new form of colonialism. This paper intends to summarize and integrate the literature that provides arguments for and against China's initiative to lead economic development, notably infrastructure investments, involving countries located along the route of her traditional land and maritime silk trade. By reviewing literature which links China's leadership initiative from the perspective of globalization, global business competition and colonialism, we hope to furnish information and an analytical basis which are useful to support a better understanding and policy making for BRI partners. Fundamentally, a win-win situation is seen to be vital in such partnership.

Keywords: Globalization; Belt and road initiative; Colonialism.



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1. Introduction

The Maritime Silk Route, which is also referred to as the "Maritime Silk Road", was "the first official international sea-trading route in Chinese history" (Xiong, 2014). The recent overland "economic belt" and the "maritime silk road" are referred to as "One Belt and One Road" (OBOR) and "Belt and Road" in official documents (Fallon, 2015). Likewise, this concept was first introduced in September 2013 in a speech given by President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan (Stec, 2018). "The project of the century" is how Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi touted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the world when addressing the UN General Assembly on 21 September (Kovrig, 2017). It has a greater focus on China's near-abroad and Eurasian neighbours through the Silk Road Economic Belt, as well as a New Silk Road Infrastructure fund, all with the aim of promoting greater economic integration and regional growth (Gu, 2015).

As a "Silk Road" map, BRI envisions an interconnected Afro-Eurasian future grounded in an interconnected Afro-Eurasian past (Kuo, 2017). Indeed, BRI's boosters tout its massive economic promise and claim it could benefit the entire world and lift millions out of poverty. Overall, the 'Belt & Road' strategy, as it has come to be known, is an umbrella term for China's plans to re-establish both the overland Silk Route Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route (Robbins, 2017). Increasingly, the BRI has reached beyond Asia and Europe; it is becoming a global strategy for China (WWF., 2017).

To date, BRI has gained the support of over 100 countries and international organizations, and more than 40 of them have signed cooperation agreements with China (Xinhua, 2017). In Malaysia, the government's reactions to the initiative are largely positive. For example, the Malaysian Transport Minister, Dato' Sri Liow Tiong Lai, who is also the President of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), has repeatedly expressed Malaysia's support for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Further, our Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Najib Razak has reiterated that Malaysia supported the initiative in principle and is getting further details from China (Lockman, 2005). Whereas in Thailand, although the BRI is still in the initial years of implementation in some way, it will swiftly have a huge impact on Thailand's economy. For instance, in a major boost to Thailand's transportation infrastructure, the military

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government is set to sign a more than \$5 billion agreement with China for a high-speed rail network under this initiative (Corben, 2017). On the whole, as noted by Lee Ju Yee, an economist at Singapore, "Southeast Asia countries need foreign capital to help fund their fiscal and infrastructure investment needs. China brings ready capital and expertise in the right time and China's investment will continue growing, boosted by the BRI (Yap, 2017).

Although BRI is an open, diversified and win-win project poised to bring huge opportunities for the development of China and many other countries (Chin and He, 2017), to some extent, this initiative could be seen as a trigger for new projects, new tools, or reforms of existing ones (Szczudlik, 2016). Likewise, many Western critics have viewed this initiative as a grandiose foreign policy to expand Beijing's influence to poor nations hungry for economic and infrastructure development (Ho, 2017). A review of BRI literature indicates that this initiative has been widely written and commented from economist, scholars, political and academic pundits and so on, however, there is no consensus on whether the true aim of China's BRI is to generate greater trade and enhancing connectivity between China and Africa, Eurasia, Europe, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia or it is just served as a new form of colonialism.

While most observers, researchers and scholars evaluate the BRI issues from economic, political and security aspects, the reflections of this research on the BRI is of a different nature. The present research, therefore, intends to summarize and synergize the literature that provide arguments for and against the perceptions on the link between colonialism and BRI. This paper will furnish more information/input about BRI to the policy or decision makers, and then recommend areas which are vital to be considered in order to create a win-win situation for both China and its BRI partnering countries.

2. Literature Review

Today, the BRI is not the only one initiative in Asia. By the same token, there is a proliferation of infrastructure initiatives, such as India's "Blue Economy" and "Act East Policies", Korea's "Eurasia Initiative" and Japan's "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure: Investment for Asia's Future" (Jetin, 2017; Szczudlik, 2016). Although President of China, Xi Jinping believes the revival of the spirit of Silk Road will strengthen China's commercial tentacles and stronger economic growth in the region; regrettably, not everyone agrees with him. Even some media have referred the BRI's ambitions to "globalization 2.0", a new type of globalization that will be driven more by the East than by the West (Xinhua, 2017). Besides, some scholars went very far to describe globalization as the legacy of colonialism (Basheer, 2015).

Additionally, The New York Times predicted that China is aiming to use its wealth and industrial know-how to create a new kind of globalization that will dispense with the rules of the aging Western-dominated institutions. Furthermore, Flounders (2017) also noted that the goal of BRI is to refashion the global economic order, drawing countries and companies more tightly into China's orbit. In the same vein, BRI could be viewed as a new version for globalization with Chinese characteristics, which is likely to be distinct from the one led by the US after World War Two. It is a Chinese Vision of "making our planet great again" borrowing President Macron's slogan (Stec, 2018).

An important question raised in this research is whether the BRI which is also referred as "globalization 2.0" is just a new form of colonialism by another name as the term 'globalization' is one of the commonest terms used to describe world politics as it stands today (Kaarbo, 2011). As a matter of fact, "the role of colonialism in today's global economy and the responsibility of the former colonial powers are spelled out, particularly in the last sentence. Big companies are said to have taken the role of the former colonial powers. This can be interpreted as a description of globalization as continuing colonialism" (Mikander, 2016). Indeed, colonial powers of today do not need military might and occupation to control the lives and destiny of billions of people. In this context, apart from controlling the economy, capitalism and cultural forces could be used to control and facilitate access to precious resources overseas (Huillier and Garfalo, 2014).

As one of the major aims of BRI is to turn Eurasia into an economic and trading arena, as well as to break the domination of the American-led transatlantic regime (Chaubey, 2017), therefore, it is not surprising that the initiative has caught the attention of Western analysts. They usually would use the geopolitical approach taking China as a rival to Western interests, rather than viewing China's initiative as a form of development aid and foreign policy (Gu, 2015). For Westerners, BRI is a manifestation of the changing geopolitics and the realignment of forces, reflecting a move to shift the centre of gravity of trade to the East and establish China's predominance in global politics (Hussain, 2017).

Moreover, not all projects under the BRI seem economically viable, which suggests that they have been included for geo-political or other reasons. For example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), lacks economic justification because CPEC is to traverse some of the most lawless and insecure parts of the world (Menon, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that key voices within Pakistan have been publicly questioning the CPEC's economic benefits to Pakistan, pointing out that the virtual and real economic benefits accrue only to China. Indeed, BRI is a merely a strategic Chinese blueprint for China's colonial control of Pakistan in perpetuity, strategically and economically (Chaudhury, 2017).

More importantly, India remains wary about China's strong strategic bilateral relations with Pakistan per se. BRI is often simplistically understood as being opposed by India and supported by Pakistan (Jacob, 2017). India is worried more broadly about China's economic and diplomatic expansion through Asia, and in particular across countries and waterways that it considers to be its sphere of influence (Durden, 2017). In the same manner, an economist from India, Mazumdar R. (2017 July) commented that in reality, BRI is largely motivated by concerns about slowing growth in China and the desire to boost China's global influence, will eventually create an

inextricable debt trap in most of the countries which comes under the ambit of BRI. Obviously, India's protestation is due to its sovereignty concerns over the nearly \$60 billion CPEC, a flagship project of BRI, which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) (The-Times-of-India, 2017 October). As a whole, India has always insisted on referring to BRI as a "unilateral" or "national" project of China's rather than a regional, multilateral one (Venkataramakrishnan, 2017).

What's more in the US also threw its weight behind India's opposition to the CPEC. The US in fact has revived two major infrastructure projects in South and Southeast Asia in which India will be a vital player (The-Wire., 2017). In truth, India's primary objection is an entrenched belief that BRI will fundamentally tilt the geopolitics of Asia in China's favour – even while officially supporting all connectivity initiatives (Chaudhuri, 2017). Rather, to BRI partnering countries, this initiative seems to provide more opportunities than threats to them as it facilitates cooperation in numerous ways. Nonetheless, India has considered BRI as part of a "grand geo-political game". Such accusation mainly be due to once BRI initiative is totally completed, it will provide massive economic benefits to China's quasi-ally Pakistan, with whom India has serious border disputes and a history of major conflict (Cai, n.d.). Indian officials still openly call the BRI a "neo-colonial" project today and see it largely as a cover for China to convert its financial muscle into political and military control (Chaudhuri, 2017).

In the same vein, Namibians in Africa also view the flood of Chinese loans and investments doesn't look so much like freedom as it does a new form of neo-colonialism. On one hand, the infrastructure, which is made possible by loans from China is welcome. On the other hand, they have saddled the economy with debt and done little to alleviate the nearly 30% unemployment rate (Larmer, 2017). This is particularly true in the current scenario where the world has seen a shift in power balance, courtesy of China's emerging economic might, which challenged a US-dominant unipolar world that had been in existence since 1991 when the Soviet Union was dissolved, officially ending the Cold War (Mazumdar R., 2017). Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in China's agenda. Indeed, some experts believe that BRI is not just an economic project but one that China is promoting for political control. In some ways, BRI could resemble Britain's old colonial trading network, and could also exacerbate African countries' subservient commodity supplier relationship with China (Bauer, 2017).

Besides Africa, China has also shored up its presence in the Indian Ocean, investing billions of dollars to build port facilities and plan maritime trade routes as part of its BRI (Schultz, 2017). In Sri Lanka, albeit its authorities argue that the BRI with China is necessary to fix its economy, some Sri Lankans are worried that the project might represent a new kind of colonialism. According to DV Chanaka, a local politician, Sri Lanka is leasing lands to China where people live and do their farming. Added by him, when such a vast area of land is given away, the area will be becoming a Chinese colony gradually (TRT World, 2017).

Furthermore, Sri Lanka is currently unable to pay off its debt to China because of its slow economic growth. To resolve its debt crisis, the Sri Lankan government has agreed to convert its debt into equity. This may lead to Chinese ownership of the projects eventually. To some scholars, Sri Lanka is seriously facing debt crisis or 'debt trap' (Chaudhuri, 2017). In fact, Hemantha Vithanage, a well-known environmentalist in Sri Lanka also believes that Chinese investments in the island nation is not genuine and it might involve modern forms of colonization of the nation with Chinese characteristics (Parera., 2017). In brief, though BRI appears to be promising, the lack of a detailed plan makes it difficult to capitalize on the initiative fully and assess its long-term benefits and implications for Sri Lanka (Parera., 2016).

When BRI was first proposed in 2013, it was met with doubtfulness, regarded as China's way to transfer its excess production capacity abroad or as China's Marshall Plan to bring others into its sphere of influence. Some claimed it was merely a new form of neo-colonialism or a contrivance aimed against the Western countries (Zheng, 2017). Could China's BRI be just a new form of colonialism as colonialists come with a veil of pretence, they only show their true colours only after settling down on the territory they want to conquer (Kumar, 2017). In this regard, if colonialism is about super exploitation and western dominance, BRI could be seen as both Chinese dominance and resource extraction with far greater planning and penetration (Sirohi, 2017).

On contrary, it is very true that BRI will help instil the world economy with new imagination although we also can't deny that China can't just lead the BRI without long-term benefits in sight. In this context, for example, China has raised the demand for imported products and premium goods from Malaysia, including Musang King *durian*, coffee, bird's nest, confectioneries and *halal* food products (The Star, 2018). All in all, BRI could be a strong driver and important symbol of the new phase of globalization, which promises to transform the world over coming decades no less than the first phase transformed the world over previous decades (Zheng, 2017).

3. Recommendation and Conclusion

The way of saying BRI is a reflection of "globalization 2.0" is not totally wrong because BRI is more about investment, infrastructure and development rather than just trade in the old times (Xinhua, 2017). However, not all scholars and commentators view the BRI as a boon. To some of them, "globalization 2.0" could be also a new form of colonialism to control over previously colonized nations such as Malaysia and Sri Lanka. As such, to avoid replicating the colonialism used by the West in the past, China should obey and make full use of rules and regulations of free trade that have been established well so far (Zheng, 2017). Instead, China should learn from the mistakes the West made with globalization. For instance, many commentators and scholars have found globalization has created immense wealth and other benefits mainly to the Westerners, and are unevenly divided amongst participated countries, regions, and communities. In this regard, it is sensible and reasonable for China to utilize its wealth and industrial know-how to create a new kind of globalization that will dispense with the rules of the aging

Western-dominated institutions in order to refashion the global economic order, drawing countries and companies more tightly into China's orbit (Perlez and Huang, 2017).

To be the winner of BRI, China should reconstruct globalization, so that it becomes more inclusive (Zheng, 2017). At the very least, the gap between the rich and poor countries should become smaller, not bigger. Furthermore, BRI should open a new chapter of global connectivity by strengthening energy, digital and transport facilities all around the world. Next, it should be able to facilitate economic catching-up in remote economies. Besides, it should renew the culture of multilateral cooperation by advocating for more inclusiveness and collaboration pooling capital resources from public and private investors on cross-border projects (Villepin, 2017).

Additionally, to mitigate potential negative impacts, all BRI projects and their financing should follow the highest environmental and social standards as well as to be consistent and comply with relevant international law and standards (WWF., 2017). In the same manner, transparent and inclusive governance in BRI projects must be placed to assure positive influence the quality of BRI decision-making processes and the outcome of BRI projects. Indeed, the development of the BRI needs sincerity and resolution and the vision of all parties. China should work closely with partnering countries to seize the historical chance to develop concrete cooperation under the BRI's framework and bring the relations between China and its partnering countries to a new height. As a whole, to prevent unnecessary suspicions about its colonial ambition, China should nurture a better understanding of its intentions and visions as far as BRI projects are concerned (Dorsey, 2017).

Today, the question of how China's BRI is changing the world is often framed as a binary proposition: Is China the saviour for developing nations, the only world power investing in their future - or is this the dawn of a new colonial era? Larmer (2017). To its partnering countries like Malaysia and Pakistan, China's BRI is both timely and a much needed mechanism to defuse economic and geopolitical tensions. On contrary, to others like India and USA, BRI has a hidden agenda, which may involve modern forms of colonization of the country with Chinese characteristics. No matter what the proposition is, overall, the reviews from the rest of the world have been mixed, with several countries expressing suspicion about China's true geopolitical intentions, even while others do praise the scale and scope of BRI (Bruce-Lockhart, 2017).

Obviously, the association of the BRI with "Xi Jinping thought" suggests that Chinese companies are being encouraged to focus on quality growth and profitability, not just growth at any cost. Moreover, the BRI's association with global funding entities such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank demonstrates its commercial focus (Wijeratne et al., 2018). To partnering countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan and Thailand, it is without doubt that BRI projects will create new job opportunities, improve cross-border connectivity and spike investment flow into parenting countries, benefitting the fields of property development, mobile payment, infrastructure, trading and cultural-based industries (The Star, 2018). On the whole, the outward looking BRI, seeking common prosperity, is certainly undeniable at all will have a massively transformative impact on the economies of the vast Asian and African regions encompassing 68 countries with over 65% of the world's population (Kohona, 2018 February).

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