



Rethinking China's Leadership through an Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT:

This article deals with the modern Chinese leadership under President Xi Jinping. The study places great emphasis on the Belt and Road Initiative, which has come to characterize the Chinese president's strategy. A less empathetic and more pragmatic approach to global governance has emerged in recent Beijing presidencies. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to improve global financial integration, trade liberalization, and infrastructure connectivity. The BRI's potential to meet Beijing's desire for global governance leadership is assessed using the most widely utilized International Relations theories. According to the neorealist paradigm, the newly developed BRI institutions, along with unique norms and practices, have a substantial deconcentrating and delegitimizing influence on certain of the Western-centered global governance systems. In a neoliberal worldview, the BRI and international commitments complement one another, enhancing China's role as a responsible state and increasing its influence in a shifting global governance pattern.

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Introduction

Since President Xi Jinping proposed the BRI in 2013, it has gained relevance in Asia, Europe, and beyond. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was put in the Party's Charter after the 19th National Congress held in October 2017. First held

in May 2017 in Beijing, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation pledged to “promote an open economy, safeguard free and inclusive trade,” and “oppose all forms of protectionism.” Some praised the project’s importance as an “impetus for international collaboration” and said it could “complement other connectivity initiatives.”

Recently, China has been increasingly involved in global governance, supporting the reform of existing international institutions, constructing a security bloc in its region of influence, and adopting multilateral processes that are coordinated with other international regimes. By altering global governance and order, China is rising while the present US administration is acting like a decaying hegemon, whether intentionally or unwittingly.¹ Influence-building without divorcing itself from the international systems that have surrounded China since its opening up in the previous century, and using those regimes to exert force in the world as a means of gaining leadership.² As China’s power and confidence grew, it shifted from a passive to a more active role.³

While it typically acts as a “status-quo, system-supporting power via working through international institutions,” China’s change in global governance may be due to discontent with the system’s organization.⁴ In foreign policy, Xi Jinping’s BRI has helped China gain the leadership it seeks in global governance.

This paper is significant to International Relations. Conventional global governance, for example, falls short of today’s international power balance. China’s operations and foreign policies will have a stronger impact on global governance in the future. A number of smaller nations have decided to collaborate with China on the BRI since President Xi Jinping announced it. Detachment from international duties and global governance results adds to the issue. Former US President Donald Trump has rejected the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), pulled out of the Paris Agreement, and accused the transatlantic counterparts of free-riding. As a result, the United States faced a loss of its influence over rising powers like China, understanding that “dominant economic powers” must “adapt to this restructuring of power relations” and “develop a new platform for international cooperation.”⁵

Schweller and Pu (2008) examine how China is attempting to establish its own hegemony.⁶ Cooper and Zhang examine Chinese foreign policy after the 2008 global financial crisis. In 2015, a Chinese diplomat discussed China’s global governance policy. Shambaugh’s (2013) analysis of China’s role in global governance raises several points.⁷ Pantucci and Lain (2017) investigate the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) as part of the BRI.⁸ Ikenberry and Lim examine the AIIB’s counter-hegemonic potential (2017).⁹

The paper seeks to address a research gap by analyzing the ways in which China seeks enhanced leadership in the global governance system under the current administration. As a consequence, the BRI helps China achieve its aims.

Methodology

The study’s research question is as follows: “Is the BRI a feasible instrument for China to gain global governance leadership?”

The BRI's role in helping China achieve its stated aim under Xi Jinping's leadership will be examined using content analysis. This analysis questions whether or not the BRI is effective for China to take leadership, mirroring structural realist ideas. A rising state like China may use the BRI to challenge the present global governance framework and bring about systemic change, say Ikenberry and Lim.¹⁰ In this situation, the assumption of leadership by Beijing in the global governance system is an example of external innovation that strives to generate systemic change. This method identifies the causal process that occurs between a cause and an effect, as well as the specific stages that comprise that process.¹¹

Following King Keohane and Verba's logic, we can infer information about previously unseen occurrences.¹² Unlike previous studies that focused on the BRI's influence on specific nations or regions, this study will explore the BRI's role in allowing China to lead the global governance system.

One of the five dimensions of organizational performance measured by the Multilateral Organizations Performance Assessment Network (MOP) is results-based. The United Nations Development Group defines results as "changes in a condition or situation that derive from a cause-and-effect link." The expected or achieved short- and medium-term implications of an intervention's outputs, according to national objectives and local requirements, are outcomes. Because the BRI is new, it is difficult to assess its long-term impact. However, the BRI's tangible effects may change the present global governance pattern, which aligns with Beijing's objectives as identified through thorough content analysis and IR theories.

To be credible, a social science conclusion must "strongly link theory and facts" and "convey the observable implications of a theory."¹³ To this goal, several international organizations and multilateral institutions' reports and data will be thoroughly examined. This study's goal is to investigate if the BRI can already change the global governance system.

Many feel that an organization must be able to achieve political outcomes that are supported by its member states in order to be effective.¹⁴ From a beneficiary standpoint, the world's acceptance and veneration of the BRI is crucial. Also, other nations deferring to the BRI might help China acquire global leadership. The collection of reports, interviews, and speeches by government officials from BRI countries is crucial to comprehending the BRI's global impact.

Not only that but its efficacy must be defined in terms of distributing power and enhancing China's prestige rather than a direct step toward its stated aims. The Chinese government also does not often and completely expose the BRI's ongoing process, making it difficult to grasp the BRI's entire scope.

Xi Jinping Era: A New and More Open Strategy

A new Xi Jinping reignited the CCP's foreign policy discourse. The Chinese Dream and a community of shared destiny for mankind are two of his most famous concepts. And more crucially, they help construct a logical link between the world and China, allowing it to assume greater leadership in global governance.

2012 saw the shift from risk-averse caution to hopeful “dreaming” of a better future where China “reclaimed its proper position.” Chinese diplomacy has been driven by the Dream since 2012.¹⁵ China’s historical humiliation and desire to rebuild the country to accomplish its two-hundred-year-old objectives are driving forces behind this idea. Callahan called this concept “nostalgic futurology.” The “China Dream” was formally enshrined in the CCP Charter in 2017.¹⁶

Global governance is a top goal of the Chinese government. In October 2015, Xi Jinping urged the CCP Politburo to analyze the global governance pattern and structure. He also said Beijing should “fight for reform of the unfair and illogical arrangements in global governance” and expand emerging and developing nations’ representation.¹⁷ But the China Dream has a different goal than decades-old Western standards. “China is constantly attempting to construct global governance with its own characteristics,” says He Yafei.¹⁸

It is comparable to the “China Dream” in attempting to improve China’s and worldwide society’s situation under economic globalization, but it differs in end aims and starting points, according to Yafei.¹⁹ One obstacle to China’s Dream is the Western world governance system’s requirement for “agreement on constructing a unified global institutional framework.”²⁰ Despite its significant gains inside the system, Beijing is growing more dissatisfied with the limits imposed by the hegemonic nations to maintain their relative supremacy. To Chinese authorities, the West’s “cold-war mindset” and “zero-sum game” still prioritize their own interests over others. This implies that the Chinese government may depict its own objective as being in line with Asian, ASEAN, and global aspirations. William Callahan argues that “what enriches China likewise improves the rest of the world.”²¹

The China-led global order is portrayed as exclusive, unequal, and a threat to global peace and prosperity, in contrast to the American-led world order, which is portrayed as exclusive, unequal, and a threat to global peace.^{22,23} The Sino-centric ideal places itself at the heart of the global dream, promoting nationalistic feelings at home while posing as a leader of global governance reform. Many Chinese individuals believe that if China surpasses the United States as the world’s most powerful economy, it must assume the position of a global political leader.²⁴

The China Dream also includes self-identification with the developing world in terms of a “similar history, equal value system, and development model.”²⁵ China sees its path to growth as a successful example for other developing countries. As a result, the Chinese Dream is always associated with others and sympathizes with growing nations’ growth strategies.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is based on Xi Jinping’s vision of mankind as a community of shared destiny. This notion indicates that as countries grow more interconnected, integrated, and intertwined, their fate is tied together. President Xi Jinping’s January 2017 keynote address at the UN Office in Geneva emphasized China’s overarching pledges to construct this community: world peace, shared development, partnerships, and multilateralism. Developing a society requires the provision of public goods, which China has an obligation to

do. “We (China) will continue to open up, share our development opportunities with other countries, and welcome them aboard the fast-growing Chinese economy,” he remarked.

The current context of nationalist populism, anti-globalization, and trade protectionism in the West, coupled with a fading US trust in international liberalism and multilateralism, calls for such a speech.²⁶ China’s high rhetoric of both the China Dream and the common destiny embodies its own ideology of openness and inclusion, balance and mutual benefits, which not only reflects the evolution of its narratives and imaginaries from a risk-averse strategy prior to Xi Jinping’s leadership to a more proactive and Sino-centric approach under his leadership but also provides global governance with an alternate thought.

China’s Grand Opening through the Belt and Road Initiative

The BRI is part of a much wider system that crosses national borders and requires global collaboration and coordination on a multilateral scale to deliver on its promises. To put it another way, the BRI’s success depends on “creating new arrangements, alliances, and other forms of groupings that represent a need for change of international institutions.”²⁷ According to a UNDP and CCIEE analysis of the BRI, better cooperation between member states is required to achieve complementary benefits.²⁸

The BRI’s link to global governance includes providing international public goods and establishing multilateral organizations. Indivisibility and non-exclusivity are significant public good features.^{29, 30} This means that a person’s consumption of a product does not reduce the quantity consumed by others and that a person’s usage of a good does not prohibit others from having access to it. International peace and security, laws, norms, and institutions are global public goods. Because markets tend to under-produce global public goods due to free-riding and market failure, powerful countries have a larger role in the international arena. With the BRI, China now offers global money to nations in need of developing or modernizing infrastructure. More crucially, it is pushing the SCO and other international security institutions that align with the BRI. In order to thrive, affluent economies might “benefit from replacing or reorganizing physical infrastructure assets in place,” whereas underdeveloped nations require robust infrastructure.³¹ When China delivers public goods to the global community, it may be a complementing, if not an alternative, source of influence to the US-dominated global governance structure. This has profound consequences for global governance evolution.

The AIIB, for example, is an example of China’s engagement in the development of international institutions supporting the BRI. The BRI also seeks to establish links with existing international and regional institutions, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNDP, Eurasian Economic Union, and ASEAN. Inclusion, incorporation in a larger international context, and connection with other multilateral procedures effectively bind this China-led endeavor to the current global governance structure. Chinese institutions have been set

up to “enhance the predictability of connections with other national governments” and their repercussions.³² Beijing’s efforts to construct inclusive and multilateral systems, as well as gain respect from other nations, may have a substantial influence on the existing global governance pattern.

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Innovative Strategy for Governance and Progress

The BRI is providing new incentives for infrastructure funding, including industrialized countries. The visible BRI initiatives are largely focused on constructing infrastructure, not on reducing poverty; despite earlier investments and financing efforts, China’s “ODI and ODA both remain restricted compared to those of other big countries,” making it a “partial economic power.”³³ Because there was no clear strategy, Chinese funding and international investments were handled case by case. The BRI has boosted China’s global economic dominance by improving national coordination, reversing a long-term trend.

Traditional state-backed policy development banks were also institutionalized and activated to assist this massive undertaking. These new financial platforms joining the global financial governance framework provide borrowing nations with greater options. With these China-led procedures in place, the BRI may deconcentrate international financing power now held by the US, replacing it with more liberal, more attractive China-led institutions.

In terms of membership, the AIIB has eclipsed the ADB in the BRI’s international development fund. The ADB had 67 members at the end of 2017, while the AIIB had 84 authorized members, up from 57 at the start of 2016.³⁴ Non-regional states like Germany and the UK have major voting power in the AIIB. However, China is the AIIB’s largest stakeholder, with 26.6% of the votes.

The BRI’s blend of global and bilateral money has helped bridge the infrastructure investment gap. The Silk Road Fund has \$40 billion, and the AIIB has \$100 billion. Then-Chinese President Xi Jinping promised.

The Silk Road Fund got \$14.5 billion more during the 2017 BRI Summit. According to data, China’s Development Bank (CDB) and Export-Import Bank (EIB) set aside \$36.2 billion and \$18.8 billion, respectively, in 2017 for BRI infrastructure, energy, and financial cooperation.³⁵ The Exim Bank made available US\$121.2 billion in loans till the first quarter of 2018, compared to US\$110 billion retained by the CDB at the end of 2017.³⁶ The BRI has “extended more than US dollars” in funding from Chinese state-owned banks.

The “flagship blueprint” funded almost 400 projects worth \$50 billion.³⁷ Despite its vastness, China’s BRI cannot overcome a large infrastructure funding shortage. Future infrastructure spending in Asia would require both public and private participation, with private financing accounting for 60 percent of overall funding, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB).³⁸ In order for private funds to be successfully delivered, “public sector activities to increase private engagement and financing in infrastructure” are critical.³⁹ Successful BRI projects “may offer a foundation for an upsurge in other sorts of investment” with the government’s endorsement.⁴⁰ BRI funding and investment have widened

recipient nations' financial options beyond traditional loan systems, allowing developing countries to satisfy their infrastructure and energy demands. By 2014, the CDB and Exim Bank had financed an estimated US\$684 billion to foreign borrowers, about equal to the WB and other western-backed MDBs combined.⁴¹ This has a de-concentration impact on the present global creditor powers.

The BRI's innovative norms and practices may delegitimize the traditional international financial architecture's rigidity and inefficiency. Improved governance and operational efficiency have been recognized, as well as softer lending requirements.

BRI loans need less political and economic involvement from the countries receiving them. Unlike World Bank and other regional development banks' loans, which require previous efforts to alter domestic policies like as public procurement, budget priorities, and transparency, BRI loans have no strings attached. Countries with weak domestic governance, human rights records, or debt sustainability may be eligible for BRI finance, but the particular requirements are kept secret to maintain the BRI's flexibility and China's space for maneuvering.

Because China is not a member of the Paris Club, it must deal with financial difficulties on an individual basis. Most of the world's most advanced industrial nations are members of this club, which was founded in 1956. Although "the list of main sovereign creditors appears different now than it did in 1956," China's weight and practices as a worldwide top sovereign-to-sovereign creditor must be recognized internationally.⁴² A lack of participation in important global economic governance groups has "demonstrated a predisposition to allow loan recipients to avoid international institutions and norms" (such as the Paris Club and the OECD). That China does not "subscribe to any international standards for environmental and social safeguards" contrasts sharply with traditional institutional infrastructure funding requirements that include "mandatory prior public disclosure and comment periods," extensive stakeholder consultation, and risk mitigation measures.⁴³

According to AIIB standards, precautions should be taken "in proportion to the risk" (Ibid). The BRI's de-concentration effect is telling, as more nations rely on BRI for infrastructure investment, potentially eroding US supremacy.

While "more experienced multilateral lenders typically take a year or two" to approve projects, the AIIB cleared four in only six months.⁴⁴ According to reports, Chinese policy banks allow monies to be transferred directly into Beijing-based accounts of Chinese state-owned firms that carry out the project utilizing Chinese goods and labor upon agreement with a host nation.⁴⁵ Development countries "have learned not to take sophisticated, dangerous projects to the current banks, while in reality, these are exactly the initiatives where the world would benefit from multilateral institutions' assistance."⁴⁶

Some observers see this as a positive step for the AIIB's non-resident board of directors.⁴⁷ The usual resident board is inefficient and costly (nearly US\$ 70 million per year for the WB). Its efficiency and streamlined process may better

attract developing countries, but challenge and delegitimize established norms and regimes while reducing the gravity of lending in the existing international system that has allegedly undermined what poor people need most: “an effective government that works with them today and tomorrow.”⁴⁸

BRI is thought to have influenced the current global financial governance environment by adding a new level of variety.

Global governance structures are changing due to China’s “centrifugal” influence and the de-concentration and de-legitimization of current global governance structures due to BRI. Some argue that reforming existing regimes will boost China’s prestige and influence in global governance.

The IMF’s Board of Governors agreed on significant quota and governance reform in 2010, but the US Congress refused to approve it. According to Ikenberry and Lim, the US Congress did not authorize reform until the AIIB was established in 2015. China’s vote share increased from 3.8 to 6% of all emerging and developing nations.⁴⁹

In 2018, China’s voting power at the IBRD increased from 4.45% to 5.75% after the US Treasury Department approved a US\$13 billion WB capital expansion. The WB’s role as a counterbalance to China’s new financial mechanisms and growing influence has been reaffirmed. “The administration had an early desire to leave, but changed course after realizing China would fill a void if the United States retreated,” say Zumbun and Fidler.⁵⁰ Preoccupied with the prospect of China gaining power through the BRI, creative institutions, and fresh norms and practices, the US has made steps to limit its relative loss by giving China greater influence. This may allow China to put additional pressure on the Bretton Woods system.⁵¹ Another example is the reported rise in the Asian Development Bank’s capital share of developing economies in 2016.

Overall, effective BRI projects require competent financial institutions inside China’s area of influence. China, a newcomer to multilateral development, needs new norms and procedures to attract other secondary states to the old global governance framework. Chinese demand will gradually, if not instantaneously, strengthen China’s influence in decision-making by traditional global governance regimes and their key backers. The BRI may allow China to take the lead in advocating for a change of these regimes’ architecture.

The Belt and Road at the Core of China’s Leadership

According to neoliberal prisms, hegemonic leadership “cannot set and enforce laws without the permission of other sovereign nations.” The BRI might be seen as a method for China to become the world’s hegemon under a more inclusive global governance framework. Initially intended for 65 countries, non-regional countries have indicated an interest in joining the BRI. The BRI was endorsed by all international leaders who attended the Belt and Road Forum on International Cooperation in May 2017, including 29 heads of state or government and an official delegation from about 60 nations. Sources say China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has garnered backing from 54 countries, including four non-regional ones.

Major infrastructure projects in Central Asia have “not only satisfied China’s aims, but also helped realize those landlocked nations’ collective desire to become (land-linked),” according to the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program.⁵²

Southeast Asian nations have shown signs of warming up to the BRI, which had been greeted with suspicion due to maritime disputes with China. The inauguration of Philippine President Benigno Aquino III and a proposed Vietnamese law establishing three new economic zones with China as the principal beneficiary are designed to calm tensions with Beijing. The BRI is helping to settle territorial tensions, boost China’s influence in the region, and gain elite backing.

Elite BRI endorsements are also found in Central and Eastern European nations where the “16+1” has allowed them to engage with China and promote the BRI. In order to create a viable form of partnership, China and the CEECs must find their “own voice.”⁵³ With considerable Chinese investment (estimated at US\$8 billion in the area), many infrastructure projects, including the Belgrade-Budapest train line and the Montenegro-Albania highway, were tackled with diversified participation.

Besides India and Bhutan, six other South Asian countries have joined the BRI, with Pakistan being China’s major partner. While “other creditors” apparently haven’t been so nice to the Maldives, China is believed to have provided financing for an international airport upgrade with a 20-year maturity and a 5-year grace period.⁵⁴ These countries benefit from easy funding and China’s flexibility in resolving their debt concerns.

In addition to Russia, six other post-Soviet independent governments have expressed support for the BRI. In 2013, Moscow resisted serious discussions on the BRI’s cohabitation with the EAEU due to concerns about Chinese authority entering Russia’s sphere of influence. But sanctions imposed by the West when Russia invaded Crimea made it impossible for Russian businesses to raise finance.⁵⁵ Moscow will press Beijing to include the Trans-Siberian and northern Baikal-Amur railways in the OBOR project.⁵⁶ Russia’s involvement in the BRI framework is crucial, according to the Russian government. For their part, Armenia and Azerbaijan “aspire to establish the north-south connection between the Persian Gulf and Georgia’s black sea ports where Chinese investors.”⁵⁷ The ambition to compete for the transportation hub motivates leaders from Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine to support the project.

China’s recent increased commercial exposure in this region has brought BRI expansion closer, even though it is still in its infancy. At the 8th CASCFC Ministerial Meeting, ministers stated that they would seek “a growth route that matches their national conditions, ardently hope to join in the Belt and Road building, and stand ready to strengthen practical cooperation in many sectors with China.”⁵⁸ Since the BRI includes e-commerce and renewable energy development, this area sees the BRI as a potential for states to diversify their economic models.

Overall, these countries' leaders, intellectuals, and officials embrace the BRI. According to neoclassical realists, Chinese diplomacy has been effective in persuading other nations to adopt the BRI, and this is because China has obtained the endorsement of other countries' leaders to implement the BRI. Following the BRI, other governments have decided to defer to multilateral frameworks such as the SCO (for Central Asian countries), CASCF (for Arab states), and "10+1" (for ASEAN nations). A vast package of investment and commercial prospects has tempted these nations to China's side, which may boost their roles and Beijing's diplomatic and economic position inasmuch as it provides an alternate node of global cooperation. Since the BRI's declared purpose is to enable China's global leadership, the BRI-related nations' elites' often positive opinions have been significant.

Using Chinese labor is alleged to be one of the requirements for the soft loans granted to member nations.⁵⁹ Protests against the BRI have been spurred by a lack of job opportunities for locals and occasional conflicts between Chinese personnel and locals, even in some of the initiative's most prominent nations, including Kazakhstan. The Turkmen and Kyrgyz governments have also restricted some Chinese companies headquartered in their countries.

Public criticism centers on low environmental and social norms, as well as bad project management. Chinese hydropower projects along the Mekong have caused environmental damage and droughts in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, while China's clear-cutting forest has enraged Myanmar.⁶⁰ Because the BRI projects lack conditionality, environmental degradation has already begun as China's rising labor costs drive more "dirty" manufacturing to less regulated developing nations.⁶¹ Due to the BRI's lack of transparency, it is difficult to "enforce in open societies where an independent judicial branch, media, activists, and the public may freely criticize government and economic interests."⁶²

Because of the BRI, several countries fear Chinese power intruding on vital local industries. Despite mounting criticism, Vietnam's 2018 draft legislation on new economic zones with a 99-year lease to China is still under consideration. As well as China's 99-year lease of Hambantota port, Sri Lanka complained. Pakistanis took to the streets to protest China's intervention in internal affairs and the BRI's "unequal agreements" with Pakistan. The money from Gwadar port will be divided between the Chinese operator and the Pakistani government under the 40-year lease. For almost five years, China has been in talks with "Pakistani tribal separatists" to finish the CPEC.⁶³

Despite being the new Silk Road's eventual destination, the EU is not listed in China's official media report. The general public is likewise fighting China's influence in the EU. Following the takeover of the Greek Piraeus port by the Chinese state-owned COSCO, European Commission President Juncker suggested in 2017 a framework for screening foreign direct investments. It should only be done in transparency, with inspection and discussion, Juncker stated in his State of the Union address.⁶⁴ In 2018, 27 of the 28 EU ambassadors in Beijing criticized China's BRI for unjustly benefitting Chinese businesses.⁶⁵ 90% of BRI projects

are carried out by Chinese firms, leaving little space for European firms. Concerns over non-transparency forced the EU to postpone the Budapest-Belgrade Railway.⁶⁶ The EU's aversion to this opaque scheme may prevent China from achieving its ambitious aim.

Increasing public pressure on the BRI has lowered elite confidence in its future. Despite an early preference for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the long-term conclusion will be chosen by the people of the countries involved. If opposition remains or increases, some governments may be unable to aid the BRI. As a result, more must be done to assist the locals and protect the environment and society. In the short term, the BRI looks to be a valuable weapon for China's climb to hegemonic leadership in the global governance system since it garners respect from other nations by protecting the elite group, gathering customers, building alliances, and offering a new node of global cooperation. It should be re-evaluated in terms of environmental protection and local peoples' inclusion. This is the only way the BRI can survive and retain Chinese backing.

The Belt and Road Initiative: The Marshall Plan for the 21st Century?

The massive Chinese expansion in many regions of the world, especially after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, has raised many questions about the intentions of the Chinese leadership. Some even described the Belt and Road Initiative's strategy as similar to the Marshall Plan.⁶⁷ From 2013 until today, that is, since the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, many reports, books, and articles have been issued, most of which are Western-oriented, warning against the Belt and Road Initiative and questioning China's intentions. This literature indicates that China is wearing the guise of an angel by completely moving away from the strategy of hard power and wars and adopting the method of cooperation, peace, and mutual gain. For them, this strategy seems attractive to third-world countries and poor peoples who have suffered from the scourge of colonialism and wars while living in poverty and destitution. But most of these countries possess the "natural resources" that China needs.⁶⁸ This section deals with some of the anti-China ideas and opinions by reconsidering China's debt policy, which mostly includes poor countries and highlighting the concerns of some of China's partners about joining the Belt and Road Initiative.

China's Partners' Concerns about the BRI and Its Long-Term Repercussions

Some countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative have expressed their skepticism about this initiative and the actual Chinese intentions behind this great openness and huge partnerships. For example, the Italians are afraid of deepening the partnership with China for many internal and European reasons. The Italian interests may not coincide with those of China. Italian economists consider the partnership with China unequal. The Chinese economy is about six times larger than the Italian economy, meaning that China will have the final say in this partnership.⁶⁹ There is fear of the partnership mechanism, as most economic partnerships are through bilateral agreements without the presence

of other international partners. Most of the Chinese partnerships are state-owned and will be the strongest investment actor. Others suggest that China may hack information data through cyber espionage, undermining the credibility of Italian companies in industries such as information and communications technology, infrastructure, and defense.⁷⁰

Unlike some other European countries, Italy may suffer from some mismanagement, which makes it fragile and vulnerable to easy Chinese interference, and thus distorts the image of the European Union. This may apply to most of the third-world countries in Africa, Asia, and other regions that suffer from economic corruption and poor governance.⁷¹

Currently, more than 140 countries have signed memoranda of understanding and joined the Belt and Road Initiative, and this poses a threat to the United States' international standing as the number one economic and military power. Israel, the most important and permanent partner of the United States in the Middle East, has become an essential part of the Belt and Road Initiative, despite US warnings to moderate this partnership.⁷²

China, and specifically the Belt and Road Initiative, is the primary concern of the United States and the United Kingdom. In November 2020, the US State Department office published a 72-page document titled "Elements of the Chinese Challenge." This document indicates that Beijing may turn into the center of global governance through long-term agreements that may extend up to 100 years with some member states of the initiative. Therefore, the final decision will be for China in shaping the possible international policy for the next decade.⁷³

The Debt Policy Applied in Certain Cases

Some economists are concerned, and reports issued, mostly from the West, warn against dealing with China because the result will be doom and China's acquisition of the capabilities of countries that are unable to pay the debts. They resort to using the cases of some helpless countries that suffer from poverty and a deficit in the trade balance, such as the case of Uganda in Africa and Sri Lanka in South Asia.⁷⁴

It is well-known that Chinese loan-granting institutions do not impose incapacitating political or security preconditions, unlike other economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which impose harsh conditions on debtor countries, which may reach the point of interfering in sovereign affairs. This Chinese strategy has attracted many countries to borrow from China in building infrastructure and some other vital projects, which opened the door for China to conclude deals and partnerships.⁷⁵ The granting of debts is done according to an agreement agreed upon by the two parties, which includes clear terms, and there is a reference to the procedures followed in the event of failure to pay the debts.

In 2015, China seized Entebbe International Airport after the Ugandan government failed to repay its loan from the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM). Its value is about \$207 million, with an interest rate of 2%, noting that Entebbe

Airport is the only one in Uganda. However, the Ugandan government at the time denied this circulating news, considering that the airport is part of the state's assets and China is nothing but a strategic partner in development.⁷⁶

Some consider the Chinese "loan diplomacy" to be just another facet of the "carrot and stick" policy. This diplomacy has proven its effectiveness in achieving many partnerships through lending. Some reports classify all Chinese partnerships for the Belt and Road Initiative under the concept of "Chinese debt," but this is not really accurate. For example, the Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program, which is considered a complement to the Belt and Road Initiative, is based on a trade exchange, tax exemptions, and other economic facilities. Which has nothing to do with the saying "the Chinese debt trap."⁷⁷ Most of the Arab countries, particularly the oil-rich ones (which possess enormous wealth and have security and economic alliances with the United States), extend their partnerships with China without fearing a Chinese debt trap.

The concept of the "Chinese debt trap" goes back to the Indian academic Brahma Chellaney. From his point of view, China is lending countries with poor budgets huge sums and is certain in advance that these countries will not be able to pay the debts.⁷⁸ The Chinese administration developed many new terms that accompanied the policy of reform and opening-up and crystallized with President Xi Jinping, and thus some economic terms became popular and associated with China, such as "win-win strategy," "common destiny," "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "non-interference in internal affairs." On the other hand, the West, led by the United States, presented many anti-Chinese slogans, such as "Chinese debt trap," "human rights issue," "persecution of Muslims and minorities," and recently, former US President Donald Trump described COVID-19 as "China Virus" without any clear scientific evidence in addition to the growing hatred against Asians.⁷⁹

This raging situation between East and West, specifically between the United States and China, through the trade war and the growing American military influence in the South China Sea, brings us back to the Cold War period and raises questions about the shape of the world order and the position of the United States after the launch of the BRI; especially after its recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, its rapprochement with Iran, and the adoption of a policy of concessions instead of force.

Conclusion

Although global power has shifted, China and other emerging economies have failed to adjust global governance arrangements, limiting their influence in a timely manner. This paper relied on neo-realist and institutional liberalist assumptions that rising dominant powers seek influence and leadership in international affairs to secure the external environment. Neoclassical realists argue that a country's foreign policy is impacted by its domestic conditions, notably the elite's worldview and the state's might.

The BRI is Xi Jinping's most important foreign policy initiative. Under his now indefinitely prolonged term, both state narratives and global governance mechanisms have changed significantly. President Xi embodies an ideological shift from a cautious to an aggressive approach and sets the stage for the BRI's implementation. These ideas, in contrast to Washington's more inward-looking discourse, give an alternative node for international engagement. As a result, Beijing is both an insider and an outsider in conventional global governance institutions like the UN, BRICS, and SCO. As a result, the BRI should be considered an example of an external innovation regime.

The research questions whether the BRI is an effective instrument for China to assume leadership in global governance. The BRI, according to the neorealist paradigm, diversifies the international development funding mechanism by deconcentrating and delegitimizing current institutions and norms. The AIIB, the two policy banks, and the Silk Road Fund all assist in filling huge infrastructure gaps in Asia and worldwide, with fewer restrictions and more productivity than past international techniques. In addition to more flexible methods of debt relief, the BRI-affiliated nations have been able to access money for infrastructure construction and improvement that would not have been available under existing global financial governance arrangements. Due to the growing number of countries joining BRI-related financial institutions and acquiring money, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been able to challenge the current regulations in the global financial governance system.

Traditional global governance systems have adapted to give China and other growing countries more weight in decision-making processes. In addition, a more unilateral and protectionist White House encourages an institutional liberal approach that cites the BRI's commitment to the UN 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as instances of Beijing's dedication to international duties.

Despite the fact that multilateralism, as reflected in this article, may pose certain practical limitations to Beijing, the BRI is a useful weapon for China to establish leadership inasmuch as it may transform the global governance pattern in its favor. The BRI risks of a financial crisis and China's economic slowdown must be considered, as they may jeopardize its long-term sustainability.

A regime's capacity to win stakeholder support is also crucial to neoliberalism. From the receiver's perspective, the elite and the broader public are two distinct stakeholder groups. In this case, the BRI's secondary states are included. Officials and elites from countries in the BRI's six main zones have signed cooperation agreements with China, but the BRI is seen as a way to develop infrastructure and strengthen economic connections with China. Others actively participate in the BRI to shape it. Their favorable view of the BRI and participation in China's foreign cooperation forums has increased policy coordination. They may bolster Beijing's commitment to complete the BRI, and the growth of consumers and members may bolster Beijing's leadership position in providing an alternative global cooperation node.

As a result, the BRI may help China obtain popular support, which is required for China to dominate world governance. As a result, public discontent and occasional anti-China protests have harmed the elite's opinion of the BRI. Even some of the most major BRI governments have expressed worry about environmental degradation and the loss of sovereignty. Beijing should not take other nations' respect for granted and rather seek stakeholder support through a more holistic strategy.

This paper explains how China might use the BRI to achieve global leadership. In order to overcome challenges that hinder China from taking on a greater role, its long-term survival depends on future modifications. The BRI's security measures will need to be examined in the future to fully grasp Beijing's global power ambitions.

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