

Politics and spaces of China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Introduction: Research agendas raised by the Belt and Road Initiative

**James D Sidaway, Simon C Rowedder,
Chih Yuan Woon and Weiqiang Lin**

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Vatthana Pholsena

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

Abstract

We introduce this symposium on the politics and spaces of China's Belt and Road Initiative, locating the papers as concept explorations resting on case studies that contextualize and historicize Belt and Road Initiative. In the case of the first paper that follows, this includes an exploration of the historiography of one of Belt and Road Initiative's conditions of possibility, the Silk Road idea. We chart a burgeoning field of debate about Belt and Road Initiative, most often operating at broad levels of geopolitical abstraction. The papers here encourage further investigations of Belt and Road Initiative's dynamics. Such work holds promise for wider theorizing of the interfaces between culture, economy, place, space, politics and infrastructure. Our closing remarks sketch key research agendas in these domains in the light of Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road, case studies, historicity, research agendas

Corresponding author:

James D Sidaway, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Kent Ridge, Singapore 117570, Singapore.
Email: geojds@nus.edu.sg

Since it was enunciated by China's president Xi Jinping (who came to power in November 2012), discussion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has proliferated. Proposed by Xi Jinping in September 2013, as a Silk Road Economic Belt, the BRI (in Chinese 一带一路, originally translated as One Belt One Road) is a far-reaching and long-term development strategy. Alluding to the idea of an ancient Silk Road (first visualized in mid-19th century German geography), the initiative aims to increase connectivity between countries in Asia, Europe and the Indian Ocean by land and maritime transport.

The Road component of the BRI, which is sometimes also called the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), comprises maritime flows connecting ports and sea-lanes, while the Belt component is made up of land links connecting ports with hinterlands, but also visualizing as series of railways and roads between linked intersections, or 'marginal hubs' (Marsden and Reeves, 2019). Subsequently, visions of a Digital (Seone, 2020) and Polar (Woon, 2020) Silk Road developed.

While the literature on BRI is proliferating, the largest amount of interest traces the driving forces and spatial configurations of the BRI. Several journal special issues already map specific topical concerns of the BRI, tending to focus on the contemporary moment in their formulation and coverage. For instance, the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary China* (Volume 28, Issue 116) examines how the internal politics of China (under the incumbent Xi Jinping) have shaped the progress and development of the BRI. A special issue of *Geopolitics* (Volume 22, Issue 2) takes the MSRI (announced by China in 2013) as an entry point to discuss how it has affected geopolitical interactions and dynamics primarily in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. A recent colloquium in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* focuses on financing the BRI (Lai et al., 2020). *Political Geography* is soon to publish a set of 'views from the ground' about BRI (convened by Gustavo Oliveira, Galen Murton, Alessandro Rippa, Tyler Harlan and Yang Yang).

The papers here seek a temporally expansive understanding of the BRI. By tracing the critical genealogies of the BRI, they bring readers on a journey to expected sites where the BRI is legible, but also to some more unexpected or occluded contexts and prior connections folded into BRI. Such focus on the discourse and practice of BRI, in historical and contemporary terms, aligns with Tim Winter's (2019) argument that:

A biography of the Silk Road as connectivity indicates how China is now using this geocultural form for its own ends through the Belt and Road framework . . . As the "home" of silk production, China is able to insert itself at the center, both culturally and geographically, of a story of regional and East-West contact. (182)

Thereby, as Raffaello Pantucci (2019) notes:

Normatively speaking this places China in a highly positive position on the world stage. Beijing can paint itself as a power which is broadly speaking promoting prosperity and opportunity around the world, with the underlying intention to increase stability through this prosperity. The realities around this may be questionable, but it is a fairly easy vision and concept for governments around the world to align themselves with. This plays in contrast to a current American administration that seems set on confrontation around the world [. . .]. (213)

However, not only do the domestic and localized appropriations of BRI in a range of Chinese localities need to be reckoned with (Summers, 2016; Ye, 2019), but BRI tends to serve different purposes and be visualized distinctively through diverse 'local' lenses within and beyond China. Focusing on this, Thomas White (2020) analyses BRI's 'incitement of

the imagination, its positive valuation of transcontinental flows, and its recovery of historical spatialities' (2). His case study, on one of China's 14 land borders with other countries, examines 'how the BRI's spatial imaginaries articulate with rural development projects and local spatial politics' where, in an arid region of Inner Mongolia, local officials mobilize narratives about the Silk Road to secure resources.

Similarly, the government in Laos has – for well over a decade – represented infrastructural development there as a move from a 'land-locked' ((ປະເທດທີ່ບໍ່ມີທາງອອກສູ່ທະເລ, literally 'land without access to the sea') to a 'land-linked' country ((ປະເທດເຊື່ອມຈອດ, literally 'integrated country'). Such discourses now invoke BRI. A China–Laos high-speed railway linking Kunming with Vientiane as part of the BRI, currently in construction and scheduled to open in late 2021, constitutes the major axis in what James Alan Brown (2018) calls Laos's 'geography of peripheral centrality'. In a dispatch from Boten in northern Laos, Will Doig (2018) describes seeing glossy flyers bearing a map of the world:

Dotted lines lead outward from China to points throughout Asia, Europe and Africa. The cities key to making One Belt One Road a success are marked with stars: Singapore, Mombasa, Tehran, Colombo, Moscow, Rotterdam, and a tiny city in northern Laos [Boten], perfectly placed on the route of a high-speed railway, its location labeled in Mandarin and marked with the biggest star of them all. (51)

The BRI certainly looks ambitious when depicted on such maps. However, as Narins and Agnew (2019) remind us, no official Chinese government BRI map exists. Yet this absence of formal cartographic representations of the BRI helps to promote what they call a 'useful fuzziness' with regards to China being open to crafting a new as yet undefined geopolitical identity. Crucially, it has also enabled myriad attempts at interpreting, through maps, the exact geographical presence and distribution of BRI projects. Indeed, a quick search online yields dozens of such maps, including those, such as Figure 1, that depict BRI extending into the Arctic and Southern Pacific oceans.

Besides the production of countless maps, there are hundreds of reports, thousands of pages of journalism, numerous books and a burgeoning academic literature in multiple languages on the subject. For instance, a visit to a bookstore in the Chinese provincial city of Chongqing by one of us in August 2017 revealed the visibility of publication on BRI. The book displayed as having topped the bestsellers chart was by a team of researchers at Zhejiang University, in consultation with China's governing body, The State Council. In the opening pages of the book, whose title translates to '100 Questions and Answers about the BRI' (一带一路一百问), the authors claim that the book seeks to 'widely circulate BRI's rich contents and far-reaching meanings' (广大传播一带一路的丰富内涵与深远意义) in order to enhance public understandings of this particular project (Qin et al., 2015: 2). The scale of references to BRI in China itself – official, academic and in wider public discussions – is such that it has become an emergent geopolitical culture, offering a frame through which China's sense of its place and world mission are configured (Lin et al., 2019). Much of this literature therefore operates at the level of broad scale geopolitical speculation and polemic however, linked to wider discussions about the rise of China and interstate relations (Li and Li, 2015; Woon, 2018). As Du and Ma (2015: 1005) put it emphatically, the BRI constitutes China's 'grand geo-strategy' (地缘大战略) in order to usher in a 'break-through in China's "rise"' on the international stage.

While there is no shortage of reflection on the BRI in terms of large-scale geopolitics and geoeconomics and an emergent literature on BRI's geoculture (Winter, 2019, 2020), accounts of how the BRI reconfigures and operates through localities remain less frequent. Charting

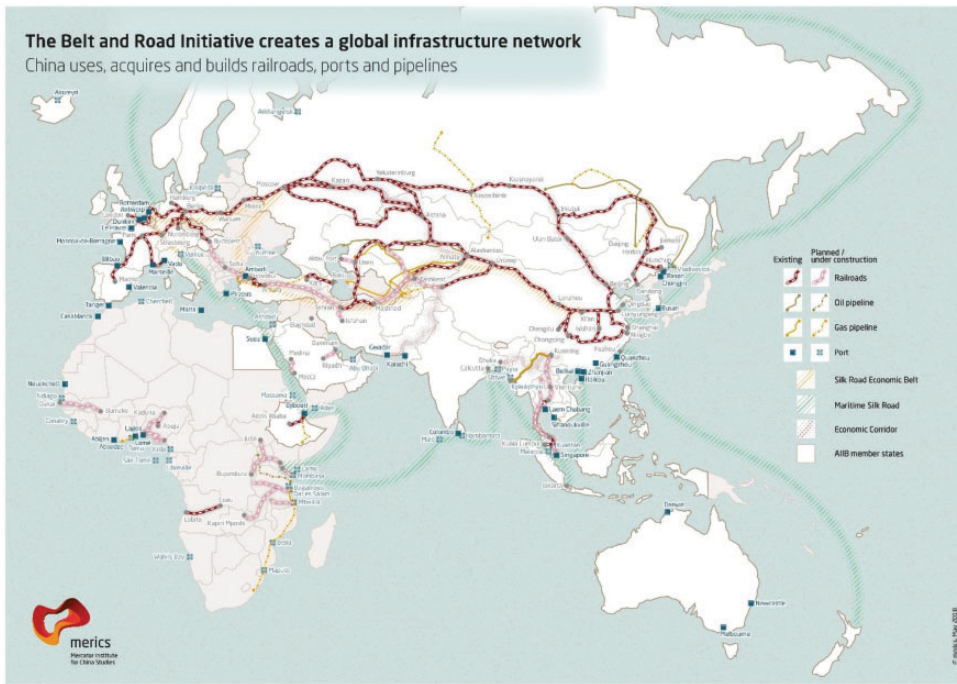


Figure 1 Map of BRI. Source: Reproduced with permission of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (<https://www.merics.org/en>).

the uneven impacts and locality-specific configurations of BRI has scarcely begun. It may be the case that ‘BRI cartographic representations emphasize . . . a frictionless world of global economic integration’ (Grant, 2018: 391). Arguably, however, BRI’s strategic focus on key nodes and connections will reinforce enclaved modes of uneven development ‘governed by a range of legal norms and bounded in an array of formal and informal means that frequently cut-across established state boundaries’ (Sidaway, 2007: 332). Laos is one site where this becomes legible (Nyíri, 2012; Pinkaew, 2019), but the centrality of ports and freight terminals within BRI signifies a wider reanimation of enclave development. In turn, the way that the discourse of ‘development’ has operated in many BRI partner states resembles what Ferguson (1994: 255) called an ‘anti-politics machine’ whereby the: ‘. . . development apparatus . . . is not a machine for eliminating poverty that incidentally is involved with the state bureaucracy; it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes “poverty” as its point of entry’.

The power of BRI’s discourse of mutuality, progress and improvement lies in its capacity to align with its partners’ bureaucratic state power, often stressing BRI’s compatibility and complementarity with respective national visions and policies of development. This alignment of BRI’s global and its regional partners’ national ambitions also powerfully forecloses further discussion of critical political themes about power, rights and beneficiaries. At the same time, the power of the BRI rests on the notion that it revitalizes ancient Silk Roads.

Yet critical work on the historicity of the BRI is limited, in terms of either its immediate antecedents or the ways that 19th and early 20th ideas of the Silk Road that originated in European oriental studies were recycled into BRI’s narratives about revitalizing connectivity. The seven short papers that follow bring critical lenses to bear on BRI’s politics and spaces,

beginning with an historical account that investigates a missing link in the historiography of the Silk Road concept. Therefore, while several of the case studies here trace how (like the Lao example we have mentioned above) infrastructural projects that have been decades in the making are now repositioned as elements of BRI, in the first paper, Håkan Wahlquist revisits the longer term historiography of the Silk Road idea since it was coined in the 19th century. He approaches this through the biographies and works of three German and Swedish geographers – noting neglected links in the circulation and popularization of the Silk Road concept in the late 19th and early 20th century that long predate, but have enabled, its re-amination in the form of BRI. Attaching the words ‘Silk Road’ to something can generate lively interest. Peter Frankopan (2018), who is Professor of Global History at Oxford University, describes what happened when he published a paperback bearing Silk Roads in its title:

When *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* was published in 2015, it touched a nerve The book sold more than a million copies around the world, spending eight months in the *Sunday Times* Top 10 and being a number-one bestseller in the UK, the Gulf, India and China. It turned out lots of people wanted to learn more about the world – about other peoples, cultures and regions that had enjoyed glorious times in the past. It turned out that many were keen to read a history in which the focus has been moved away from the familiar and insistent story where Europe and the west dominate the narrative towards Asia and the east. (1–2)

Had the ‘Silk Road’ idea been more obscure, arguably there would be less capacity for it to be adapted to BRI today and concurrently to China’s contemporary form of soft power. Today, what Lin (2019: 3) identifies as BRI’s emerging ‘patchwork of scattered infrastructural plans, geopolitical visions and imaginations’ intersect with ‘an aspirational trans-Eurasia transport network that now informs the BRI’s basic morphology’. That morphology has a trans-continental and trans-oceanic (indeed planetary), scope. Its boundedness to and contradictory embeddedness in localities (be they nodes, margins or crossroads) and territories reward critical scrutiny and offer rich domains for theorizing interfaces between space, place, politics and infrastructure.

The other six papers that follow Wahlquist’s history of the Silk Road idea develop a wide range of arguments and case studies. Tim Summers discusses the BRI’s temporal and spatial boundaries, noting its immediate precursors in China but also its expanding geographical scope, and the lessons these hold for interpreting BRI as ‘an ideoscape’ expressing multiple ‘perspectival constructs’. Henryk Alff reflects on the MSRI’s process of implementation in the Indian Ocean, conceptualizing the set of ocean corridors and interconnected places as a provisional and flexible assemblage, shaped by power relations and local negotiations. Andrew Carruthers also focuses on maritime spaces, proposing the notion of the ‘aquatectonic’ to explore the relations between intensity of flows and infrastructural formations in the context of the BRI. The next three contributions also provide grounded examples of the real and potential impacts of BRI-linked infrastructures, shaping and influenced by power dynamics and relations between regional, national and local actors. Shaun Lin and Carl Grundy-Warr stress the importance of paying attention to how local communities respond to BRI-related infrastructure projects affecting physical landscapes and livelihoods. Moves to make the Mekong River navigable for larger cargo ships in northern Thailand sideline local protests and environmental concerns. Their paper signals wider capacity for work on local controversies and resistances to BRI. These complicate the statist visions that trans-regional and transborder connectivity assume in the form of a political technology built on established regimes of expertise on logistics, and the political elites that also feature in Hasan Karrar’s and Till Mostowlansky’s paper on Tajikistan’s and Pakistan’s relationship

to BRI. They stress BRI's late 20th century antecedents in both cases and the benefits the two countries' entrenched elites draw from Chinese investments. In the context of newly built China–Nepal trans-Himalayan roads which have also been folded in narratives about BRI, Galen Murton calls this dynamic 'infrastructuration', to refer to the ways in which (based on a Nepal–China case study) road construction offers both 'an aspirational imaginary' and a material basis connecting people, places, state and capital. Murton shows how, for the borderlands of Chinese Tibet and Nepal, new transnational infrastructure projects promoted within the BRI build on and sustain state consolidation.

Each paper can inspire further work on the cases and sites that they draw on. The set as a whole provides a geographically and temporally expansive framing of the BRI and its histories. They invite further locality studies and historical contextualization that can then reflect back on the wider dynamics of BRI amidst shifting geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural processes. They also seem to engage with and acknowledge the broader tensions of China trying to express itself as a civilization-state that foregrounds extensive civilizational connections across national borders through the BRI while maintaining a bordered notion of a state that stresses national, territorial integrity (Grant, 2018). Joe Williams, Caitlin Robinson and Stefan Bouzarovski (2020) propose nuanced analysis of the BRI's spatial and scalar politics, to approach BRI through debates about urbanization, beyond China-centred discussions. We concur. However, we would add to the agenda, reactions to BRI on the part of actors who formulate visions that articulate with or countervail BRI. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union is arguably an example of the former (Kaczmarek, 2017). Japan's Southern Strategy (Wallace, 2018) and the US-led, Australia and Japan allied Free and Open Indo-Pacific (Arase, 2019) are examples of countermoves. Such policy visions from diplomats, strategists and other apparatuses of state are largely beyond the scope of the papers that follow. The impacts are uncertain, though writing a year before BRI was announced, Edward N Luttwak (2012) cautioned against bullish prognoses regarding the rise of China, noting that 'even the strongest rising power can be overcome by the gathering of adversaries summoned by the very increase of its own strength' (67). In their paper below, Shaun Lin and Carl Grundy-Warr draw attention to another form of resistance to BRI, from the bottom up – or grass roots – along the Mekong. Other papers assembled here signal how and where the BRI reworks existing geographical connections and spatial relationships, notwithstanding claims about its novelty in scale and scope.

Other research questions arise from BRI, related to the relative distinctiveness of China's projection of soft power and internal legitimization. How does this reflect the reworking of imperial discourses, both those coined in 19th century Western and Central Europe and Qing-era China as well as in other imperial contexts, such as the Qajars and Romanovs and their successor states? How and where does BRI articulate with other renditions and appropriations of the Silk Road idea amidst intersecting and sometimes competing national and post-colonial imaginaries? Finally, cutting across geo-political, -cultural and -economic dimensions, how does the BRI refract frontiers and security¹? Impacts will vary, reflecting uneven development and struggles, or what Hameiri and Jones Zou (2019) term 'many bumps in the belt and road' (492). In turn, such questions mean placing the BRI in a critical comparative register: examining calculative logics and spatial practices of circulation accompanying the wider logistics (Chua et al., 2018) of capitalism, conflict and sovereignty.

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Note

1. See Arduino (2018) and Clarke (2020) for suggestive considerations of 'security' and BRI.

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