Theorising from the Belt and Road Initiative
(一带一路)

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Abstract: As frame for the set that follows, this article first considers the range of theoretical interpretations of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Our focus, however, is on a related yet distinct set of questions. Rather than theorising BRI per se, we approach BRI as a source of theoretical implications and reflection – asking what it signals and implies for wider cultural, economic, political, social and urban theories, and for histories of and afterlives of imperial geopolitics.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, infrastructure, method, theory

The eight years since China’s Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路) (hereafter ‘BRI’) was announced in 2013 have seen burgeoning debate about BRI’s cultural, environmental, geopolitical and economic dimensions. The scale of this literature has grown so briskly that it has quickly become difficult to survey. In addition to extensive media and corporate analysis, there are thousands of scholarly papers and hundreds of books dedicated to interpreting BRI and tracing its impacts in English and Chinese. Nonetheless, although some observers claim as many as 14 frames have been applied to BRI (Yang and Van Gorp, 2021), it seems to us that the literature falls into four broad categories:

- **BRI as geopolitics:** Works reading BRI geopolitically – as an embodiment of Chinese strategy and the response of other powers (Blanchard and Flint, 2017; Sidaway and Woon, 2017; Gong, 2019; Lin et al., 2019; Clarke, 2020), or through topical foci, such as transport (Lin, 2019).

- **BRI as geoeconomics:** Works that read BRI primarily through a geoeconomics lens, frequently with reference to ideas of a spatial or infrastructural fix in the context of China’s development trajectory. The agency of Chinese provinces, municipalities and firms is sometimes foregrounded (Summers, 2016; Yu, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Flint and Zhu, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Sum, 2019).

- **BRI as Chinese exceptionalism:** Works that stress BRI within ideas of Chinese exceptionalism, variously with reference to notions of China’s peaceful rise, with BRI envisaged as a form of cooperative development that is ‘win-win’ for all and offers a new spirit of harmony, often building on legacies of prior south–south cooperation (Liu and Dunford, 2016; Dunford, 2021) or place BRI in the context of China’s conceptualizations of order and sovereignty (Freymann, 2020; Narins and Agnew, 2020). These narratives relate to the wider universe of Chinese language geopolitical writing (Woon, 2018).

- **BRI as ‘The Silk Road’ imaginary:** Popular accounts and scholarly work that trace putative ‘Silk Road’ antecedents to BRI and their uses, including cultural diplomacy (Winter, 2019), bottom-up connections (Ngo and Hung, 2020) and critical work on the Silk Road idea ‘as a modern narrative of China’s connected past, rather than as a historical fact’ (Chin, 2021: 17) and on the twentieth century genealogy of such narratives (Wahlquist, 2020).
There are pros and cons to each strand, and it can be helpful to read across them, conceptualising BRI, rather like European integration is sometimes discussed, as a multiperspectival process (Stec, 2018). Moreover, sub-strands of each literature consider a range of scales – local, national, regional, transregional and planetary, and their intersections (Joniak-Lüthi, 2020). There is therefore an emerging literature that examines BRI through particular localities or projects (Oliveira et al., 2020). Whilst we are interested in the overlaps and interstices between the interpretations of BRI, our focus here and of the set that follows arises from the fact that within work on the nature of BRI and its consequences, consideration of BRI’s wider implications for theory remain underspecified. In the light of, but distinct from, ‘Research agendas raised by BRI’ (Sidaway et al., 2020) or policy implications (Blanchard, 2021), our aims here are theoretically committed reflections from/in the context of BRI. So, rather than theorising BRI per se, we approach BRI as a source of theoretical implications and reflection (encouraged by the arguments on Asia as Method by Chen, 2010) – asking what BRI signals and implies for wider cultural, political and social theories. To date, such considerations have been posed in terms of theories of the urban (Williams et al., 2020; Apostolopoulou, 2021; Zheng et al., 2021), diplomacy (McConnell and Woon, 2021) and empire (Sidaway and Woon, 2017), debates about ecology, the non-human/more-than-human and the Anthropocene (Barua, 2020) and geographies of finance (Lai et al., 2020). And whilst BRI may speak to ideas of ‘assemblage’ – as a means to unpack relations between sites, technologies, nature, and people (Richardson, 2021), it also likely to inform theoretical development of models of ‘state entrepreneurialism’ (Wu et al., 2021) and ‘state capitalism’ (Alami and Dixon, 2020; Alami et al., 2021).

What else might be added to these? The five papers that follow addresses this question in a range of ways. Bunnell (2021) considers what BRI signals for comparative urban studies, in the context of area studies. Murton (2021) approaches BRI through critical cartography, ‘to highlight what ordinarily appears invisible’. Tim Oakes (2021) negotiates the geopolitical and geoeconomic discourses about BRI that we have identified above as two key strands of interpreting BRI. Oakes however prefers to consider BRI in terms of a set of projects whereby ‘technopolitics’ become legible; ‘to consider the infrastructures themselves, instead of the states or territories in which they are built, as units of analysis’. Traversing some similar ground, Woon (2021) focuses on a subset of BRI narratives about the Digital Silk Road, reading these in the context of debates about infrastructure, space and power. Finally, Yang (2021) considers how BRI is treated in the different (though interconnected) intellectual arenas of English language and Chinese scholarship.

In what follows, we also briefly consider four related tracks of learning from BRI – (i) for histories of geopolitics and imperial discourses, (ii) for critical security studies, (iii) BRI as a mirror to popular geopolitics and (iv) implications for critical understandings of uneven development, especially the production of corridors, enclaves and zones, ‘race’ and space.

How does BRI speak to the histories, and afterlives, of imperial geopolitics? BRI has become a point of reference in what one observer has termed ‘reactive diplomacy’. Thus, Nagy (2021) argues that BRI was first articulated by Xi Jinping in 2013, following a series of Japanese government statements about connections between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, dating back to Japanese Prime Minister’s Abe Shinzo’s first visit to India in 2007. Nagy adds that United States’ unwillingness to recognise China as a potential equal was a contributing factor. In turn, general reactions to BRI have fuelled further invocations of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in Australian, American, Indian, Japanese and European discourses. As Kai He and Mingjiang Li (He and Li, 2020) note, ‘Indo-Pacific’ is supplanting references to the Asia-Pacific and Pacific Rim – popularised in the 1990s, when they were entangled with the post-Cold War and globalisation narratives (Dirlik, 1993). The Silk Road idea emerged in nineteenth century German writings but has since been appropriated by the BRI as an imagined a ‘revival’ of the Silk Road. Indo-Pacific as a term first emerged about half a century later in German geopolitical writing of the 1920s and 1930s (Li, 2021).

Doyle (2020: 27) refers to way that empires ‘adopt and retool each other’s technologies and state practices’ as ‘inter-imperiality’. Thus, how do today’s BRI and Indo-Pacific narratives reconfigure retrospectively previous imperial
discourses? Some reactions to BRI appear to invoke Western notions of destiny and order that emerged in the 19th and early-mid 20th century and were honed in the Cold War. These include the November 2019 establishment of a ‘Blue Dot Network’ to certify infrastructure projects by Australia, Japan and the United States, and the ‘Build Back Better World’ (B3W) initiative launched in June 2021 by the G7 member countries. The announcement of a trilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) over the sharing of nuclear submarine and other strategic technologies, signifies that the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is witnessing a ‘new kind of balance of power’, brandishing what a former permanent secretary at the Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed a ‘seismic shift in the post-Cold-War strategic environment driven by a more transactional United States of America and a more aggressive China’ (Kausikan, 2021: A20). What implications does this hold for understanding of Chinese and American exceptionalism and their interactions? Almost a decade ago, just before BRI was announced, the American policy-intellectual Edward N Luttwak argued that that American and Chinese strategic culture resemble each other (and other ‘great states’, such as Russia), in how their scale and power ‘diminishes situational awareness’ (Luttwak, 2012: 100) about how they are perceived as threats by others. Moreover: ‘because of its inherent magnitude, quite independently of China’s conduct on the regional and international scene, the very rapid growth in its economic capacity and military investment must evoke adversarial reactions, in accordance with the logic of strategy’ (op cit, 257). Luttwak is best known for describing the rise of ‘geoeconomics’ – which he hyphenates as ‘geo-economics’ – in an early post-Cold War article (Luttwak, 1990; see Vihma, 2018). BRI and some of the responses to it mobilize grammars and vocabularies of ‘geoeconomics’.

However, our second track considers BRI’s connotations for work other interfaces of critical security studies, geopolitics and geoeconomics. The role of Chinese security companies as contracted to BRI projects (Arduino, 2018) is likely to become more central to the field of security studies. Beyond this however, BRI foregrounds questions about the emerging synergy of security and economy in China. Has this synergy become a motor of innovation? What forms will this take and how does BRI figure in them? The evolution of the US as a ‘national security state’ during and since the Cold War points to the strategic electronic innovation benefitting from federal largesse that has enabled the U.S. techno-capitalist edge in computing, especially software. In Weiss’s (2014) America Inc? Innovation and Enterprise in the National Security State, she demonstrates how the close connections between the U.S. national security system, surveillance and techno-industrial innovation lends the system a creative dynamic. Accounts of scale and significance of state (Greenwald, 2014) and corporate Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) address this dynamic relationship. In the last few years, Chinese firms and the state have rapidly rolled out facial recognition and other surveillance technologies, first in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and then across the PRC. In the light of the widespread internment of Uighur citizens based on association, movement and suspicion, Byler (2019) characterises this development as ‘terror capitalism’, resting on a massive data system using artificial intelligence predictive technologies, biometrics, cameras and checkpoints. Byler signals that this is now poised to corner export markets in other authoritarian states:

In just the last two years, the state has invested an estimated $7.2bn in techno-security in Xinjiang. As a spokesperson for one of these tech startups put it, 60% of the world’s Muslim-majority nations are part of China’s premier international development project, the Belt and Road Initiative, so there is ‘unlimited market potential’ for the type of population control technology they are developing in Xinjiang. (Byler, 2019)

In sum, BRI is a site to think through security and space – to ‘see like BRI’, is simultaneously to see like a state, a security company and a strategist.

The third track concerns how BRI speaks to popular geopolitics. How do Chinese idioms of this – and their translations – shift the ways that soft power and hegemony are conceptualised? Whereby ‘geopolitical culture’ in China
‘appropriated to visions of China’s destiny’ (Lin et al., 2019) have been reflected in action films and narratives about the BRI references to practical geopolitics include the term ‘Wolf Warrior Diplomacy’ (战狼外交), coined from Wolf Warrior 2 (战狼2), a blockbuster Chinese action film, known for its patriotic narrative. Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (战狼外交) implies a practical geopolitics of great power competition, mobilising geoeconomics, a turn away by Xi Jinping from Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of ‘hide your strength, bide your time’ (韬光养晦) (Son, 2017; Zhu, 2020).

However, BRI is also frequently presented (especially in China) as a co-operative mutually beneficial mode of what has been termed ‘worldmaking’ (Getachew, 2019). This articulates with elite and popular visions of modernity and that have been revitalised in China since the early 1990s. In an account of China’s reassertion of sovereignty amidst memories of humiliation, Bickers (2017) notes that the hand-over of Hong Kong in 1997 marked a watershed moment reflected in modes of cultural production, such as Ai Jing’s music video ‘My 1997’ (我的1997), large-budget historical films, and the growth of ‘Red Tourism’, involving visiting places of historical importance for the Chinese Communist Party. Since 2012, however, this has all been subsumed into the ‘China Dream’ (中国梦) which in turn has been interwoven with BRI. The visual culture of the Mao era (see Sun, 2019) meets the video and internet – in a series of dream like visions.

These bear comparison with earlier corporate representations from half a world away and half a century ago when, in 1971, Coca-Cola’s advertisers visualised a youthful, diverse community of young people, filmed on a hillside in Italy, holding Coke bottles with logos in different languages. The young people sang ‘I’d like to buy the world a Coke’ (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VM2eLhvsSM). This became an iconic commercial vision of a world united by sugar and caffeine and the most expensive advertisement made until that time, combining iconic product, advertising and the recording industry. The commercial and political contexts vis-à-vis the United States’ sense of its place in the world – are dissected in Chang’s (2014) Who We Be, in which he notes how the advert, featuring Coke bottles with Arabic, English and Thai logos, was the first with such a multi-racial cast to air on the US networks. Coke was being marketed as universal (Gieryn, 1987). It was impactful: ‘The Coca-Cola Company and its bottlers received more than 100,000 letters about the commercial. Many listeners called radio stations begging to hear it’ (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021). The 1971 Coca-Cola advert embodies the globality of the commercial discourse that would feed into a wider discussion of globalisation in subsequent decades (Roberts, 2003).

On the fifth anniversary of BRI, in 2018, the China Daily assembled a modified version of the 1971 Coke advert to the words ‘I’d like to build the world a road’ (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLm2m9Sw8ZA). The video and other BRI-related promotion videos may not have had the impact of Coca-Cola’s, but share an aspiration of worldmaking, amidst claims of harmony and youthful vitality. Copyright issues aside, the linking of the ‘China Dream’ with the original ‘American Dream’ contains a powerful message – the cultural ascendancy of the ‘China Dream’ in the global realm. BRI becomes a domain where such narratives and a repertoire of practices and policies interact (Loh, 2021).

The fourth track that we reflect on here considers how BRI speaks to work on the spatiality of uneven development, in particular corridors, enclaves and zones (Sidaway, 2007; Chettri and Eilenberg, 2021). For Mayer and Zhang (2021: 974) the main territorial pattern (associated with BRI) is not the nation or the region but the corridor. However, ports have been proposed as a site where zonal capitalism has long been legible, as in a study of Portals of Globalisation, drawing on the case of Mumbai since 1833 (Maruschke, 2019). China’s developmental trajectory in the 1980s relied heavily on Special Economic Zones, usually near to ports, with Shenzhen providing the spark. BRI may seek to rework and rebalance these (Lin et al., 2019). But ports (maritime, inland and airports) emerge as key sites where the maritime road meets the land belts: ‘uniting land and water worlds’ (as in the subtitle of a survey of Asian Port Cities, Siddique, 2016). Indeed, it leads unsurprisingly to the development of a distinctive ‘port city’ culture. An indicative example is the Southern Transport Corridor between Singapore...
and Guangxi over sea, and onward over land, to the rail hub of Chongqing, in interior southwest China (Chong, 2017).

In turn, what connections and comparisons are at work when cities such as Chongqing, amongst the largest inland ports in China, on the confluence of the Jialing and Yangtze rivers, is juxtaposed to (and envisaged as connected with, via BRI) Duisburg which is Europe’s largest inland port, at the confluence of the Rhine and Ruhr rivers? BRI thereby speaks to wider work on logistics, mobility and networks. But here, we confine ourselves to some remarks on forms of uneven development present in BRI. In so doing, we refer to the Cambodian coastal city of Sihanoukville. In a dispatch from there, the journalist Sebastian Strangio (2020: 5) describes returning to Sihanoukville, and being:

Astonished by the changes. Like a tropical storm surge, a wave of Chinese capital had overwhelmed the city’s infrastructure and sparse planning regulations. High-rise hotels and apartment buildings pressed up into the evening sky. City streets crumbled under the weight of cranes and cement trucks, and rainwater pooled in the ruts. The focus of the development was the dozens of Chinese-run casinos... The scene inside reminded me of the casino settlements I had visited in far flung parts of Myanmar and Laos which had sprung up in loosely regulated jurisdictions to tap the dammed-up Chinese demand for gambling, a practice banned in mainland China outside Macao.

Sihanoukville welcomed many Chinese tourists before the pandemic disrupted travel, with several airlines flying directly from coastal and inland Chinese cities (see Fig. 1).

What forms of enclosure result and what are the associated racializations? Strangio notes that Cambodians are employees – or largely excluded from the casinos, whose clientele are mostly Chinese tourists. Others point to the highly dualistic and racialized labour markets in Shihanoukville (Franceshini, 2020). Whilst the speculative bubble was already easing before Covid-19, economic boom (and likely bust) is hardly distinctive to BRI. Nor are casinos unique to enclaves or restricted entry buildings in Southeast Asia – as the urban forms of Las Vegas and other gambling zones in the USA (and their modifications elsewhere) testify. What is distinctive to places like Sihanoukville and other such places enfolded into BRI, and how this characteristic relates to forms of urbanisation, remain open questions. Whilst there may be analogies with ‘casino enclaves’ that have emerged elsewhere around China’s borders with Southeast Asia (Nyíri, 2012; Sims, 2017), perhaps one sign of what is emerging might be found in the name of a new waterfront condominium – The Bund (Fig. 2) – which references an archetype of imperial modernity in pre-war Shanghai Bund.

We are not suggesting that Sihanoukville will become what the Shanghai Bund was in the 1920s and 1930s. Nor is it the Macau of Southeast Asia – though Sihanoukville’s casinos, like

Figure 1. ‘Belt and Road Tourism’ (in Chinese), sign visualising BRI’s elements at Sihanouk International Airport. Source: photograph taken by Shaun Lin [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
those elsewhere in the region, involve ‘processes of channelling, sorting and bordering’ and ‘new articulations of mobile identities and exclusion’ (Zhang and Yeoh, 2016: 1064). Enclaves and speculative urbanisation lead us to the questions about what intersections of empire, money, power, ‘race’ and space is BRI configuring and how will BRI shift our understandings of them? In a review of three books considering BRI, The Economist (2019: 76) mused that ‘As a phrase, “the Belt and Road” may come to be used in the same, shorthand way as “the West” is today’. Yet these geopolitical categories of ‘the West’ – and its others – are increasingly in flux (Müller, 2020; Waisbich et al., 2021). BRI hastens their transformation. Congruent with such transformations, BRI invites shifts in cultural, social, political and urban theory.

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