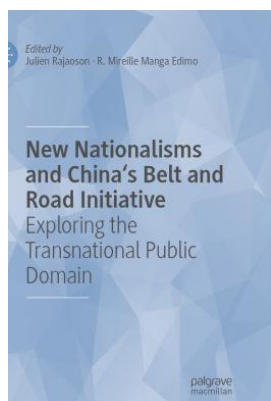


Book review

New Nationalisms and China's Belt Road Initiative: Exploring the Transnational Public Domain

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New Nationalisms and China's Belt Road Initiative:

Exploring the Transnational Public Domain

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China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping in Astana Kazakhstan constitutes a myriad of components amongst them "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)"; "The Maritime Silk Road (MSR)"; "The Made in China 2025 (MIC)". This globe-spanning strategy has tipped the global balance of power to China's advantage reshaping local economies and regional networks supposedly threatening the once unchallenged hegemonic mainstay of the west. All this in an unhinged market free economy that supposedly allocates factor endowments of production and business to the best and most efficient. The BRI juggernaut "Dragon" seemingly has ushered in an inevitable multipolarity of sorts. The contributions of this volume authored by leading scholars with multidisciplinary expertise provide detailed case studies of the recalibrating China's footprint globally. The BRI is China's signature global foreign policy and the largest ever global infrastructure undertaking that dwarfs the US Marshall Plan for Europe in comparison. It is dual-sided with a relational and dialectical composite features. By January 2022, China had signed more than 200 documents with 146 countries and 32 international organisations. The book is not exhaustive, but has case studies including those from Africa, Asia, Central Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, Brazil and South Africa. The BRI as a carrier of Chinese norms, values, identity, culture competes against the erstwhile embedded Eurocentric dominance of the USA and the EU. This transnational public domain has become contested space as the Chinese rise is counterpoised by a declining USA/EU. Against this backdrop the new nationalism is not a new model but consists of the responses, reactionary attitudes, feelings, sentiments, socio-cultural, and policy responses from both state and non-state actors to the BRI.

In the case of Angola, China's BRI infrastructure investment is fundamental for the country to realise its national policies, for example in modernizing Angola's rural economy on an industrial scale. This has consolidated the governments control over economic nationalism. The oil guarantees by Angola through concessionary loans from China with no intrusive conditionalities as demanded by western governments and their international financial institutions has facilitated ease of business. Any debt repayments difficulties arising has enabled ease of debt restructuring and rescheduling to the chagrin of western financial institutions as they view this as debt-trap diplomacy. China's BRI and concessionary loans to Angola has enabled the enhancement and diversification of its supply-side and demand-side sectors.

A comparative approach on four diverse African countries all underpinned by the BRI. In 2007 the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) under the presidency of Joseph Kabila concluded the Sino Congolaise des Mines (Sicomines) with China. This agreement committed Beijing to build the nation's infrastructure such as roads, highways, schools and hospitals in exchange for mineral rights such as cobalt and copper in the DRC. The Sicomines agreements was not successful until January 2021 with the new DRC presidency of Tshisekedi. Under the latter's presidency a memorandum of understanding(MOU) was signed, providing for cooperation on the BRI with China.

On the question of Kenya, Chinese policymakers viewed Kenya because of its favourable strategic location as a "maritime pivot point". Thus it offers access to East and Central Africa and serve as a conduit for raw materials, including Sudan and Ugandan oil. Three major BRI projects have been the flagship of Kenya's infrastructural rehabilitation:

- expanding Mombasa Port, the region's largest port
- building a deep-sea port and related infrastructure at Lamu.
- laying a standard-gauge railways across the country.

Both in Nairobi and Mombasa, Huawei built Africa's first safe city with artificial intelligence managed cameras and surveillance systems. These BRI projects in Kenya have their western critics especially the USA, who argue that the projects have been costly for Kenya compromising the sustainable management of their foreign debt. Further the critiques remonstrate the lack of transparency around the BRI deals has encouraged corruption and rent-seeking. On the contrary, I argue that many US companies have regional headquarters in Nairobi, therefore the intrusion by China's BRI compromises US efforts to maintain their hegemonic influence.

Although the smallest country in Africa, Djibouti is an active participant in the BRI. Its geo-strategic location has been enviable to China regardless of its miniature size. Proximity to the Middle East and Europe and the trade and energy transit lanes between Gulf of Aden and the Red-sea compliments China's "Maritime Silk Road" ascendancy. This enables maritime counter-piracy operations in the Indian ocean and the Gulf of Aden. This has also enhanced cooperation with the African Union in facilitating humanitarian peace and security to catalyse socio-economic development for the citizenry.

Under BRI China has also extended a world class military base in Djibouti to the west's (USA, France, Germany, Italy, Spain) grudging acquiescence who also have military bases. With Cameroon, this book has outdone itself in China-BRI bashing and no opportunity is given in the book on China's position for the reader to independently ascertain for themselves the pros and cons of BRI. On 31 August, 2018 Cameroon with China signed a MoU on the BRI and how to strengthen economic and cultural cooperation. The "Made in China: is emblematic of China as an advanced country in the design of agricultural machinery globally. The Cameroon Agricultural Technology Application Center (CATAC) in the small village of Bifogo became a test case for the operationalization of BRI. The book only spews the projects failure mainly on the part of the Chinese insinuating that they might be government spies. That there is no pre-planning with the locals, unavailability of electrical energy to enable irrigation systems and as a result no end products like rice, maize and cassava have been produced.

In the aforementioned countries, BRI enjoys relatively high levels of support as China partners with the host countries in substantial infrastructure building. Concerns of rising debt trap continue to be amplified on western media but is quietly and confidentially negotiated between China and the host countries. The implicit criticism of a debt-trap by the west suggests that Africans cannot undertake projects with calculated risks only if rubberstamped by the west's oversight and approval.

The Middle East has vital and strategic importance for BRI, as a key hub connecting the land and sea routes of Asia, Africa and Europe. With the advent of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 geopolitical and geoeconomic engagement of BRI has been compromised with a region in constant flux and central state governments fundamentally challenged by non-state actors. For example the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qadi with their normative transboundary global caliphate pose a clear and present danger to the definition of territorial integrity as practiced in Westphalian tradition. Given this asymmetrical and multi-layered dialectical dynamics, the BRI has not found significant traction in the Middle East.

With the demise of the Union Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1989 China’s BRI penetration into central European countries such as Czechia; Hungary; Poland; Slovakia increased assertively on a bilateral basis. Diplomatic relations with these central European countries have existed with China since 1949. They have all become members of the European Union but still from 2013 China has sought to engage its BRI bilaterally. Since then there has been improved trade between all the countries and China but with trade deficit experienced by the former as they could not compete with China. Further on its soft diplomacy programs, China has opened up Confucius Institutes in all these countries to the praise of some of the hosts citizens and displeasure to the rest of the population.

This distrust by some of the host countries citizens stems from China’s suppression of human rights and anti-democratic practices. There is accusations of cybercrime and attacks from some of these countries, and the Huawei technology giant whose digital technology and 5G network-technologies is out-competing all western technologies This is perceived by Poland and other European Union (EU) members as colonization of Europe’s digital spectrum for future spying and surveillance. In 2013, Kazakhstan is where President Xi Jinping first launched BRI, as the country is geographically located in the middle of the continent and can potentially become the bridge between East(Asia) and West(Europe). At the time of publishing of this book the China-Kazakhstan (SREB) was still at normative stage, however these are the potential attributes of the project:

- Kazakhstan can be transformed from a landlocked country to a land-linked by enabling transit corridors.
- On a cost-benefit calculus Kazakhstan can balance and profitably leverage its dependency on Russia creating a win-win outcome.
- Against the backdrop of the above Kazakhstan can attract foreign direct investment (FDI) into its productive assets and beneficiation of end products/services.

The problems stated by the book repeatedly sound hackneyed, commonplace and tired as biased China bashing. Host countries can think and act independently and reschedule and restructure deals as it has been evidently demonstrated.

The double consciousness amongst the citizenry of praise and suspicion created by China’s BRI is also true of Laos. Since 2021 infrastructure development has been most welcome with signature projects like Vientiane-Luang Prabang highway; Laos-China Railway thus ultimately linking Junming and Singapore. China as a source of opportunity and anxiety is also visited to upon by its BRICS (Brazil; India; China; South Africa) partners specifically India. The anxiety is confirmed as India views BRI as China’s desire to dominate the Eurasian corridor that encircles India, thereby hamstringing its ability to benefit from international trade. The BRI confronts maritime and continental Asia and the combined soft and hard-power diplomacy tilts the balance of power in favor of China.

This undermines and threatens India geopolitically and geoeconomically. Beyond this anxiety and mistrust, India does not have capacity to competitively emulate the BRI will find it more uphill to integrate into China dominated Asian value chains. Another BRICS member South Africa established diplomatic links with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) supporting the one China policy over

Taiwan. China has unequivocally played a pivotal role in Africa's anti-colonial struggles including South Africa and this has cemented its bona fides with all of Africa. Its trade with South Africa grew exponentially from R22 billion in 1998 to reach R220 billion by 2020 becoming the leading trading partner with South Africa, displacing the European Union, United Kingdom and USA.

This resume of cordiality resulted in the China-South Africa signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in December 2015 to jointly build the SREB and the 21st Century MSR. South Africa's intention in partnering with the BRI is to enhance its National Development Plan, Operation Phakisa, intra-Africa production and trade leveraging on various African Union instrumental such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement(AfCFTA) benefiting from a plethora of multiplier effects with welfare gains.

As the BRI is the main foreign policy initiative of the Xi Jinping administration, it has complimented the BRICS and the New Development Bank(NDB) of which Brazil wholesomely participates in all of them. From 1930 until the global financial meltdown in 2009 the US had been Brazil's main trading partner, now replaced by the juggernaut China to the chagrin of the right-wing sectors of Brazilian society. The BRI has consummated all manner of mutual investments in varied sectors of Brazilian economy. This is from significant mergers and acquisitions, greenfield investments and joint venture investments and more pointedly Brazilians strategic energy sector that's suffered a deficit of capital injection for modernization and harnessing on efficiencies. A case in point is the significant shareholding in two national energy giants in Brazil, The State Grid Brazil Holding and the Belo Monte Hydropower plant for a period of 30 years. By any standards this is the consolidation of another Belt and Road landmark by China right in US backyard.

The geopolitical and strategic dimensions of China's BRI has aroused suspicion and opposition with Australia but full embrace with Papua New Guinea (PNG). The Indo-Pacific region once majorly influenced by USA, and deputized by Australia is now nestled in China's axis of influence that provides all manner of investments with least conditionality. Seemingly after the 2008 global financial meltdown Australia and the US cannot compete with China on foreign donor funding. Their narrative on debt trap publicity, clearly has not dissuaded host countries from making the own independent decisions to enlist on the BRI investment bandwagon. This Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia region has witnessed the growing assertiveness of China and its BRI particularly the MSR. Host countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines do not feel compelled by China to be part of the BRI-MSR an implicit inference the book keeps alluding. Rather host countries have a myriad of development imperatives and amongst their list of investors is the US, Australia and China. On a comparative cost benefit calculus they will pick the investors they see fit for their countries. In this regard China presents. the attractive cost-effective investments and skills. If the grand design of BRI mainly reflects China's economic and geopolitical ambitions so is the case with the US and Australia as they can also pitch and punt much more attractive investment packages in a so called free market economy.