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## China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?

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# Chapter 16

## China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?



Anja Mihr and Brigitte Weiffen

### 16.1 Introduction

China's New Silk Road Initiative (the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) has been spinning its logistical and infrastructural web around the world since 2013. Massive infrastructural investments in railway tracks and roads, as well as in logistical centres and the agricultural and energy sectors, have been made in over 50 countries in Eurasia, spanning from China across Central Asia to Western Europe. We intentionally use the term "Eurasia" which, in line with Maçães (2018, p. 185), expresses a fundamental ambiguity: On the one hand, it might refer to a third continent carved out of the large landmass between Europe and Asia. On the other, it suggests the existence of a supercontinent encompassing Europe, Asia, and everything in between.

As the name change from the initial "One Belt, One Road" to "Belt and Road" suggests, what is being planned are in fact many belts, roads, corridors, and infrastructure projects. Though the initial focus of the BRI has been on China's immediate neighbourhood, Europe constitutes its final goal, as suggested by the reference to the Silk Road, the ancient trade network linking the Atlantic to the Pacific (Maçães, 2018, p. 135). The BRI is a central component of Chinese investment policies that have affected core public policy areas in over 100 countries in the world.

Almost a decade after the official launch of the BRI, this Special Section of this year's volume on Development and Transformation of the OSCE Region assesses the BRI's political implications. While the Initiative's focus is on infrastructure, trade, and finance—and is neutral with respect to the regime type of partner countries—it

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is plausible to assume that the BRI exerts an impact on those countries' political regimes, affecting autocracies and consolidated, weak, and failed democracies alike. BRI investments have triggered not only state responses, but also significant reactions from business, civil society, and other non-state actors. Beyond its impact on individual countries, the BRI is part of China's strategic quest to challenge Western influence, in particular the Western propagation of human rights and democracy as universal values that have shaped the liberal international order.

This and the subsequent ten chapters in this section discuss the effects that BRI investments have had, intentionally or not, on democratization or autocratization processes in recipient countries and societies, ranging from those in Europe to those in Central and South Asia. Focusing on the impact of the BRI on political dynamics, the chapters investigate to what extent political goals are embedded in the expansion of the BRI and how the governments of recipient countries respond to it. The authors look, for example, at how political regimes are affected by social movements, protests, entrepreneurship, and the rise of a new middle class in the countries where China's BRI is present and has led to significant infrastructure development.

The contributions to this special section are based on presentations at the international workshop "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for democracy in Eurasia?", organized by Research Committee 34 "Quality of Democracy" of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek from March 12–14, 2021 (see the detailed conference report by Yau, 2021).

This chapter sets the stage for the debates addressed in the special section. Starting out with a brief overview of the BRI and Chinese influence in Eurasia, it subsequently discusses core assumptions and preliminary findings regarding the BRI's impact on the political regime type of its partner countries. Furthermore, it gives an overview of the contributions to the special section, and outlines questions for future research.

## 16.2 The BRI and Chinese Influence in Eurasia

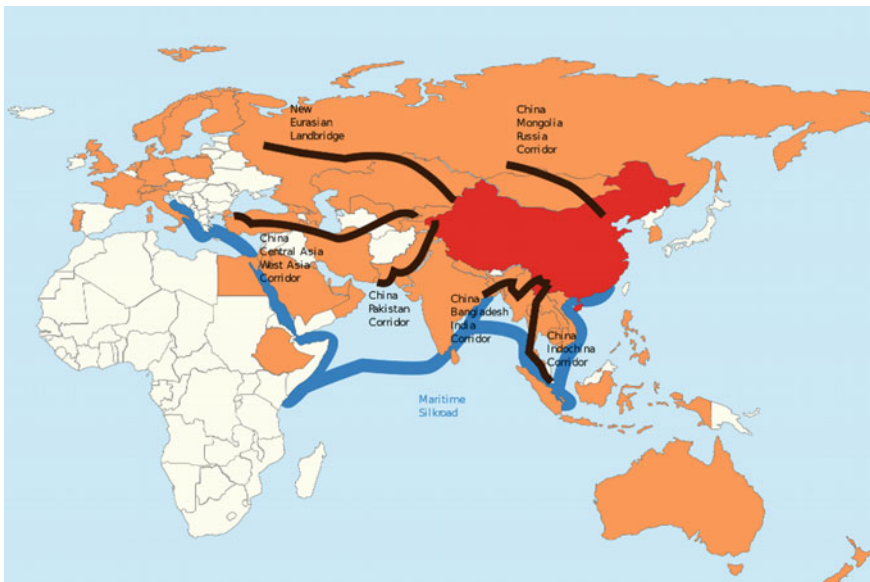
Upon his appointment as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, and as president in 2013, Xi Jinping invoked the Chinese dream of a "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" in relation to the political goals of "building a moderately prosperous society" by 2021, the year in which the CCP celebrated its centenary, and of turning China into a "modern country" by the time the People's Republic of China marks its own centennial in 2049 (Maçães, 2018, p. 125; Smith, 2021).

Announced in October 2013, the BRI is a massive project involving the funding and construction of a system of roads, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, fibre-optic and communication systems, ports, and airports—the model being the infrastructure efforts made by China as a key feature of its own rapid development strategy since the 1980s (Lairson, 2018). The BRI aims to consolidate and upgrade a dense network of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) into a multilateral arrangement, anchored by China's gravitational pull and vast open market. The "belt" describes

the land connections such as railways and highways serving to export China's vast industrial outputs to Europe through Central Asia and Russia. In turn, the "road" refers to all maritime connections such as sea routes and ports and aims to connect China with Europe via the South China Sea (see Fig. 16.1). The Initiative was inaugurated in May 2017 during the Belt and Road Forum, which was attended by officials from 130 countries (Alon et al., 2018). According to the Green Belt and Road Initiative Center (2021), approximately 140 countries around the world have joined the initiative thus far.

China's influence in the Eurasian region can be interpreted through the lens of centre-periphery relations (Fong, 2021a; Reeves, 2018; Smith, 2021). Since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, China's relations with its smaller neighbours have taken on heightened importance in Beijing's overall diplomacy. China perceives these relations as important elements of the country's rise to "great power" status and the creation of a new, Sinocentric international order. The region is a crucial part of China's geopolitical strategy fitting with a more wide-ranging strategic goal of a "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" in the light of this new order (Reeves, 2018; Zhang, 2016).

In his 2017 work report to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping identified China's peripheral relations as a necessary foundation for China's great power relations and a precondition for its broader global engagement (Reeves, 2018; Xi, 2017). In this mindset, China serves as the centre of East Asia and its surrounding jurisdictions from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the Indo-Pacific states serve as peripheries. The



**Fig. 16.1** Land and sea corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative (Source Lommes [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>])

Chinese Party-state's centralized direct jurisdiction covers twenty-three provinces and the five autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, and Guangxi in mainland China. Outside the direct jurisdiction of the CCP, there are several concentric circles of peripheries, including Hong Kong (and Macau), Taiwan, and the states of the Indo-Pacific (Fong, 2021a).

Likewise, the BRI is designed according to a logic of concentric circles, in which China tends to prioritize states in its immediate vicinity over more remote ones. The Xi administration's definitive BRI policy statement, *Push Forward the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Economic Road's Common Vision and Operation*, issued in 2015, specifically indicates that the BRI's principal aim is to construct a 'five-path' approach to establish ties between China and its peripheral partner states' domestic political, trade, finance, and social institutions in order to achieve greater integration and mutual economic growth (see chapter 17 by Dana Rice).

The BRI focuses on Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In the 2013–2021 period, Chinese investment, along the BRI, was concentrated in East Asia, encompassing Northeast and Southeast Asia (26,82%), and West Asia, including Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (21,93%). Both macro-regions account for almost half (48,75%) of all Beijing's investments in the Initiative (Nedopil, 2022). China is expected to allocate US\$ 1.3 trillion for the BRI by 2027 and has already put around US\$ 200 billion into it (Chatzky & McBride, 2020).

In the context of the Initiative, Beijing regards Central Asia, above all Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, as a source of oil, natural gas, aluminium, cotton, and foodstuffs and, even more importantly, as the key land corridor connecting China to Europe via the Caucasus, Russia, and Ukraine. The region is expected to play an important role in China's strategy to reduce its reliance on sea transports which leave it vulnerable to piracy or a possible naval blockade in the event of a major crisis. In addition to physical infrastructure, China plans to build fifty special economic zones, one of the largest being Khorgos on the Kazakhstan-China border, the heartland of the BRI on the Eurasian continent. At the same time, South Asia is an important region for the BRI, where China's primary goal is to protect its national economic interests in the form of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), vital for imports and exports, and it aims to acquire territorial assets in the region in a policy of "active defence" (namely, against Indian and US forces), such as the Gwadar port in Pakistan.

One of the consequences of BRI is that China has been increasingly involved in the management of conflicts and wars in Eurasia, above all in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. More recently, in 2020 and in 2022, Chinese business and political envoys, led by the Chinese foreign ministry, were engaged in negotiations between the conflicting parties in the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and in the Russian-Ukrainian war (see Chapter 26 by Mihr). These countries lie at geopolitically strategic crossroads for the success of the BRI, and hence regime stability is the Chinese government's priority on the Eurasian continent.

In Southeast Asia, the BRI's Maritime Silk Road plays a pivotal role in China's trade with Europe, as well as in energy and resource imports from the Middle East and Africa, since it crosses the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which are

bitterly disputed between China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Despite these potential threats to the development of the BRI, China expects to maintain its clout in the region via the significant power disparity between it and its smaller neighbours (Emmerson, 2021).

China's economy is capitalist and unlike the former Soviet Union does not present a systemic alternative to capitalism, even though the CCP in its rhetoric still refers to itself as socialist. Since the late 1970s, China's economy has grown at an average rate of about 8 per cent per year, has dramatically developed in terms of infrastructure and average income and, as a consequence, has enabled the country to narrow the gap with the West. It is anticipated that by 2030 it will be the largest economy in the world (Chatzky & McBride, 2020).

### 16.3 Political Implications of the BRI

China's economic system is emphatically capitalist, and its state-led, authoritarian political system has arguably played a major role in integrating the Chinese economy into the global capitalist system. Many Western analysts believed that the country's economic transformation and increasing wealth would lead it towards greater democracy. Instead, it has become less free and more autocratic over the past decade and has never promoted democratic institution building or the rule of law inside or outside of its territory.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2021, China has a total score of 2.21 (on a 0 to 10 scale), down from 2.97 in 2006, and sits at rank 148 (out of 167), close to the bottom of the global rankings. The country has a score of 0.00 for *electoral process and pluralism*, the lowest possible on the scale (EIU, 2022). The CCP does not allow for free elections, universal suffrage, or a multiparty system, and does not grant the people civil liberties. There is no freedom of expression; no free print, broadcast, or social media, and there are restrictions on the internet. Free trade unions, an independent judiciary, and equality before the law do not exist either. The state does not practice religious tolerance and routinely uses torture (EIU, 2022).

For a long time, external observers assumed that China pursued a pragmatic and regime-neutral approach in the conduct of its foreign policy, seeking to maintain good relations with any country where China had diplomatic, security, or business interests, regardless of regime type. As of the early 2010s, China displayed no missionary impulse to promote authoritarianism—"for now, at least" (Nathan, 2015, p. 158). Yet, while Beijing showed no signs of promoting autocracy in a strict sense, the way it protected its own regime from challenges at home and abroad has had a negative impact on the fate of democracy. China has indirectly supported autocracies, in particular in its periphery, and encouraged autocratic regimes elsewhere by the power of its example, showcasing that democracy is not a prerequisite for economic development (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Fong, 2021b; Nathan, 2015; Wu, 2021).

While China's pragmatism and willingness to cooperate with any type of political regime as long as it benefits its economic interest might have been an adequate assessment in the 2000s and early 2010s, things have gradually changed since Xi Jinping came to power. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has started to make the claim that its political and cultural influence should grow in proportion to its economic rise and the expansion of its trade links to the rest of the world. Xi's more assertive foreign policy challenges the dominance of the West in the global order, and the BRI is an important component of this grand strategy (see chapter 25 by Mandelbaum and Weiffen). With the BRI, the Chinese government intends to transform the image of the country—from a willing participant to a “mover and shaker” of the global economy.

To escape a situation in which China has frequently found itself a “political island” in a liberal international order that it did not create, the country wants to offer the outside world, starting with its periphery in Southeast and Central Asia, its own vision of a universal culture and universal values that rival the universal values of human rights and democracy proclaimed by the West (Maçães, 2018, p. 136). Hence, China is actively seeking to formulate values that can appeal to every human being: some version of development and well-being that can be readily understood and assimilated by every nation on the planet in a way that democracy and human rights cannot (Maçães, 2018, p. 52).

A White Paper titled “Democracy that Works,” published by the CCP in December 2021, re-defined the notion of democracy in Chinese terms, highlighting that state-led prosperity for all under state control is the goal of its activities, including the BRI. In this paper, China characterizes itself as a “socialist country governed by a people's democratic dictatorship,” where “dictatorship” ensures “the people's status as masters of the country” and hence serves democracy (PRC, 2021). From a Chinese perspective, the Western-style electoral systems are based on party competition which produces inferior leaders, time-wasting deliberation, and a lot of gridlocks. The main claim of the Chinese system's advantages over its Western counterpart—that it facilitates fast and efficient decision-making as well as long-term planning to maximize economic returns, stability, and security—depends on the elimination of any mechanism of democratic accountability.

A look at the history of the ancient Silk Road suggests that its extensive network of routes and hubs not only accelerated the exchange of commercial and technological goods, but that it also facilitated the movement of people, cross-cultural dialogues, and the diffusion of ideas and customs (Bryant & Chou, 2016). While China may currently not embrace autocracy promotion as an explicit foreign policy goal, its broad-ranging economic, political, and cultural initiatives along its New Silk Road will likely influence how foreign governments and everyday people think and act. In fact, the spill-over from infrastructure and trade into politics, culture, and security are not a bug in the project, but its most fundamental feature.

Western analysts are therefore concerned that, as its power grows, China will seek to remake the world in its authoritarian image (e.g. EIU, 2022). In fact, the 2021 EIU Democracy Index reported a record decline in democracy, with less than half (45.7%) of the world's population now living in a democracy of some sort. Even fewer, less

than 7% of world's population, reside in a full and consolidated democracy, most of them in Western Europe. The number of "full democracies" fell to 21 in 2021 and the number of "flawed democracies" increased to 53. Of the remaining 93 countries included in the index, 59 are "authoritarian regimes," up from 57 in 2020, and 34 are classified as "hybrid regimes," down from 35 in 2020 (EIU, 2022). Substantially more than a third of the world's population live under authoritarian rule, with a large share living in China and along the New Silk Road in Eurasia.

Despite this, we still know little about the impact of the BRI on political regime transformation, and about whether and how—despite its economic achievements which have given millions of people a higher income, qualifications, and socioeconomic prospects—it may act as a curse or a blessing for democracy. It is these open questions and the signs of change that this book section aims to illuminate.

## 16.4 Outline of the Special Section

This special section explores the key question of whether and to what extent the BRI is a curse or blessing for building and maintaining democratic institutions. It aims to contribute to the burgeoning debate about the BRI's effect on democratic institutions based on the assumption that the BRI is affecting autocracies and strong, weak, and failed democracies alike.

In their chapters, contributors elaborate on the impact that the BRI has had on democratization or autocratization processes in the countries and societies that China has invested in. They reflect on the BRI's intentional and unintentional, direct and indirect impacts on core elements of democratic governance and democratic political culture, such as free and fair elections, political rights and civil liberties, an independent judiciary, the role of the military in politics, accountability and control of corruption, citizen participation, and civil society.

The section aims to incentivize a debate on this topic through a collection of ten chapters that present the state of research on the impact of the BRI on democracy/autocracy in Eurasia. Rather than in-depth research papers, we invited authors to write shorter pieces on their respective topics, where they identify key aspects related to democratic institutions, different (and often ambiguous and contested) meanings of democratization and the quality of democracy, and outline possible debates.

This book section is structured as follows: Chapters 17, 18 and 19 provide insights and building blocks for the debate. Dana Rice's contribution in Chapter 17 gives an overview of the BRI, examining the main investments, strategies, and controversies over the past decade. In Chapter 18, Heike Holbig explores official visions of democracy in Xi Jinping's China, showing how the idea of a "Chinese-style democracy" has developed over time and might gain traction in other non-democratic regimes in Eurasia. In turn, Edward Schatz's discussion of varieties of authoritarianism in Eurasia in Chapter 19 puts the BRI's role into perspective, arguing that the push for authoritarianism in the region may have less to do with China than with broader global trends.



Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 study specific examples and cases. In Chapter 20, Artem Dankov looks at the BRI's contribution to sustainable urban development in Central Asia, cautioning that major cities are also focal points for ethnic and social conflict which can threaten regime stability in the region. Ilya Jones's contribution in Chapter 21 explores the ambiguous effects of the BRI on conflict dynamics in Kyrgyzstan, where Chinese investments have been met with public scepticism. In Chapter 22, Yurii Poita analyses the opportunities and risks of the BRI for Ukraine (before the Russian attack on the country in February 2022), pointing to a number of geopolitical and security challenges as well as the risk of an indirect impact of the BRI on democracy in Ukraine. The study by Gul-i-Hina Shahzad-van der Zwan in Chapter 23 investigates how and to what extent Chinese engagement under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has contributed to de-democratization in Pakistan vis-à-vis domestically driven changes.

Finally, Chapters 24, 25 and 26 consider the consequences of the BRI for democratic regimes on a more general level. Marketa Jerabek conducted a statistical analysis of the BRI's impact on human rights and democracy and reports the results in Chapter 24. In Chapter 25, Henoch Gabriel Mandelbaum and Brigitte Weiffen explore how different varieties of autocracy promotion, broadly understood, are part and parcel of China's grand strategy and reflect on the role of the BRI in this context. Anja Mihr's contribution in Chapter 26 reflects on the response by the European Union and Central Asian countries to the emerging influence of China on the countries across the Eurasian continent.

## 16.5 Conclusion: Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the various contributions, we can draw conclusions and derive some suggestions for further research. With the BRI being a flexible inter-governmental project in the field of economic investment and logistical connectivity, many governments in Eurasia regard participation in the BRI as more of a "marriage of convenience" and less of a trigger for political transformation. Nevertheless, depending on the level of investment and involvement, the way China deploys and governs its BRI is likely to affect how governments and citizens in partner countries think and act, and how they respond to China's aims to reshape the international political order. It seems that the BRI has become both a curse and a blessing for political regimes and civil society along the "New Silk Road." Future research should therefore try to disentangle the contradictory and ambiguous consequences of the BRI.

On the economic level, massive BRI investment has brought unprecedented development and infrastructural progress for the benefit of whole societies and has facilitated new instances of transnational cooperation, start-ups, and economic regulations. However, these investments have also increased dependence on China, led to the exploitation of natural resources, and have provided fertile ground for organized crime and local warlords to benefit from trafficking and illicit activities.

On the political level, as China prioritizes political stability in the countries it invests in, the BRI has, intentionally or not, frequently strengthened autocratic regimes, and encouraged would-be autocrats and authoritarian practices in its democratic partner countries in Europe and elsewhere. For example, Chinese influence has infringed on labour standards and levels of transparency. In contrast, in Eurasia in particular, the BRI has also contributed to the emergence of a new, interconnected civil society that feels encouraged to protest against their own, opaque, and corrupt governments when they are collaborating with the autocratic regime in Beijing. Across Eurasia, one can identify the rise of protest movements and local authorities who have voiced their concerns vis-à-vis political practices related to BRI investments. China's BRI has thus triggered resistance among civil society and governments, contributing to a sometimes modest, sometimes violent, regime transformation in the region, both in autocratic and in democratic terms.

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