

# Assessing Securitization: China's Belt and Road Initiative

Written by Katja Banik and Jan Lüdert

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/04/assessing-securitization-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>

KATJA BANIK AND JAN LÜDERT, OCT 4 2020

Napoleon warned: "Let China sleep; when she awakes, she will shake the world". As China awakens, the world around it is rumbling with the rise of national populism in the West and elsewhere. Donald Trump's "America first" policy and Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to revitalize the Silk Road, demonstrate an ostensible shift. World politics is experiencing a decisive historical moment. This has become evident with a number of factors: a growing cult of personality surrounding the Chinese President, China's introduction of a Social Credit System (SCS) and, in the West, a confidence crisis in democratic institutions sweeping through the European Union (EU) – especially 'Brexit', as the United Kingdom's move to leave the EU. These exist amongst parallel developments across the Atlantic with Donald Trump's Presidential administration in the United States (US).

### World politics at a crossroads

By putting in place protectionist measures, the US and China have begun to engage in a drawn-out trade war, escalating their systemic rivalry. The EU, less united than ever, contends with the impact of Brexit throughout a seemingly disjointed Union. These pressures are compounded by Europe's disgruntled citizenry, criticizing the EU's lack of efficacy in its response to a range of issues. The future of Europe, and its role in a global framework, have fallen into question as the US and China struggle for geopolitical preeminence.

It appears that we are living in a 'G-Zero' world, in which no country, region or group leads and offers a normative bedrock. 'G-Zero' is a term indicating that multilateral approaches are sidelined by various political strategies that are implemented as a result of national interests alone. Under these conditions of uncertainty, especially added to with the Covid-19 pandemic, certain difficulties have been exposed in which both states and regions are attempting to locate effective solutions to the list of ever-growing challenges posed by the effects of a globalized world. These uncoordinated strategies often put other actors at a disadvantage. Not only are the cost of these divergences unknown but they hold the potential to cause further geopolitical discord.

As the eminent scholar Graham Allison puts it, a key to global order is to appreciate the "structural stress that Beijing and Washington must master to construct a peaceful relationship" (Allison, 2018). We agree with this view, asking: Will this G-Zero world lead to a bipolar system in which relations between the USA and China dictate global affairs? More than ever it is necessary to sketch a common EU strategy that captures interest vis-à-vis China and the US. Alternatively, will a multipolar system characterized by peaceful state cooperation prevail? The result could be a global system where different players act, certainly in competition, but more or less complementary. New international standards and regulations provide a framework for "cosmopolitical" forms of governance while averting military conflict (Nida-Rümelin, 2017). Here the EU, above all, can define a strategy that prevents it from being pinned between China and the United States (Banik, 2019).

We analyze the BRI as a geopolitical instrument by deepening the conceptual understanding of China's overall strategy designed to exert influence beyond Asia, building upon Allison's notion of tectonic stress. We explore the impact of BRI by proposing to treat it conceptually as a novel spatial security arrangement. In keeping with the

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geopolitical vision of Jacques Ancel, we turn to the importance of bridging differences and cultivating an “identity of the heart” by concluding that whilst uncertainty sustains the potential of conflict – resulting from China's rise – it is not an inevitability as the West can forge a peaceful future through the encouraging of mutual understanding.

## Globalization, Deterritorialization and Transnationalization

Geopolitics, the study of global territory and power, informs this vignette. Globalization can be generally understood to denote the cross-border movement of people, goods, services, capital and information. This is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the increased interdependence between nation-states and the impact of various non-governmental actors (e.g. MNCs, NGOs, criminal networks) crowding the international field. Political responses to globalization, neoliberal internationalization for example, are varied and even diverging. On the one hand, protectionist measures such as customs duties, border controls in Europe, as well as in the US, signal a return to past logics of the nation-states, restrictive immigration, and closed borders. On the other hand, measures promoting economic openness and expansion are still being undertaken, from the re-conquest by China of the old Silk Roads, to the harmonization of European trade and defense policies (e.g. the Common Security and Defence Policy that is an integral part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy) (Banik, 2019).

To put it differently, transnational forces resulting from de-territorialization that has occurred with the onset on globalization compete with traditional nationalist sentiments. This phenomenon can be attributed partly to the increase in the use of networked technologies; people have more (dis)information at their disposal, including that concerning the harmful and negative effects of globalization (Lüdert 2008). In the effects of globalization there have been both losers in addition to winners. Some countries or regions have developed massive international trade surpluses, whilst others grapple with deficits and sovereign debt. Cross-border economic crime, illicit transactions and money laundering have become commonplace. There has been wealth accumulation in some regions, often controlled by political-economic elites at the expense of others. These unequal developments fuel citizens' mistrust of political classes and, as such, engendering the development of illiberal populist parties, deepening social conflicts, widening protest movements, and all of these effects lead to the efficacy of democratic regimes to be questioned through the whipping up of a 'clash of civilizations' logic (Lüdert 2018).

This being said, shared challenges that unite all the actors involved in this geopolitical issue are radically adapting how individuals work and interact. Some examples of these shared challenges include international terrorism, the effects of climate change including on food production, competition for natural resources, chronic economic, social and political crises due to the rise of an opaque global economy, widespread political apathy, and, finally, digitization. Current international institutions and organizations are lagging behind, failing to offer innovations whilst being undermined by states questioning multilateralism and underfunding global initiatives. With these developments in mind, the post-war order that emerged at the close of the Second World War is ostensibly in decline, yet, this being said, a new world order has yet to take shape (Banik, 2019).

## A “China First” Strategy?

With the revitalization of the ancient Silk Roads, the contours of a new world order are unfolding. The BRI marks a turning point in China's national policy to, as the National Development and Reform Council (NDRC) claim:

promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries (NDRC, 2016).

BRI targets infrastructure and commercial networks throughout Eurasia, an area of vast great geopolitical and commercial importance, whilst strengthening links between China and countries along the “belt”. It is not a single project, lacking a master plan, but comprises of a multitude of roads, railways and waterways. It further includes the Pacific Silk Road, which passes through the Arctic Ocean, and the Digital Silk Road, which extends into cyberspace (The Economist, 2018). All of these are central to “Xi's China Dream” of “rejuvenation” (fuxing, 复兴) – which can also

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be translated and understood as seeking a Chinese “renaissance” (Alison, 2018, 122).

In Eurasia, BRI covers more than 65 states with a combined population of three billion people. Under the leitmotif advanced by the Communist Party of China (CPC) of developing the region's wealth and preserving peace, friendship, trust and understanding – the BRI is a spatial and territorial expansion, focusing on major infrastructural developments. The 2015 action plan presented the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road Belt (MSR) with a total of six corridors. Roads and sea routes connect China to Central Asian countries, Russia and, ultimately, Europe — but especially to Africa, in order to secure the continent's natural resources, particularly its oil.

The broader normative context, beyond BRI's spatial consequences, is that China advances security concerns by promoting partnerships, not alliances. China particularly opposes US alliances along the belt which it views “as a bulwark against the advancement of Chinese strategic interests” (Morton 2017). To ensure sustained financing, China has established two institutions: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with 57 member countries, and the Silk Road Fund, a Chinese sovereign fund (Banik, 2019). These are complementary to, as opposed to competitors of, existing IGOs, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (World Bank), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Political leaders along the ‘belt and road’ welcome the BRI as it promises economic development, improvements in infrastructure, and ensures connectivity. Nonetheless, as with other Chinese investments, compliance with multilateral standards and appropriate global governance regulations are not a priority for Beijing. Despite this, China maintains that foreign aid is delivered in a demand-driven process to meet recipient needs. Still, nevertheless, corruption and opacity relating to investments flowing from China benefit political elites rather than the populations of respective recipient countries (Dreher et.al 2016). Some scholars tend to ignore this aspect, crediting China for providing African counterparts with a degree of “ownership” and “policy space” (e.g., Bräutigam 2011; Kragelund 2011; Reisen and Stijns 2011). Whilst a rhetoric of good intentions underwrites China's aid policy, and seemingly advances a norm of country ownership formalized in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, it remains unclear who reaps the long term benefits from Chinese developmental aid. This is especially the case if the recipient's needs refer to the population *en large* or, as is more often the case, to political elites and their clients. At a minimal level, dependence on investment flows generates an imbalance in China's favor, preventing recipient states from maintaining economic autonomy (Banik, 2019).

## China's meta-strategy through spatial expansion

Driving the BRI, above all, hinges on a new ideology advanced by the CPC, of securing natural resources, particularly oil and gas. This encompasses connecting routes from African resource-producing countries to Chinese production sites. The most important corridor is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which connects Kashgar in China to the port of Gwadar. Currently, almost 80% of Chinese oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca. The CPEC will thus reduce transport time and overall cost significantly, whilst simultaneously improving Pakistan's failing infrastructure. Not only will this help develop Pakistan's economy, reducing the country's energy shortages and boost its productivity, but it will also increase Pakistan's long-term dependence on China (Banik, 2019). At the same time, the infrastructure projects are being financed through concessional and commercial loans, which potentially fuel the corruption that is already prevalent in Pakistan (Luchnikava-Schorsch, 2018; Hussain, 2017).

Critically, the BRI is not simply an instrument for asserting Chinese power, but constitutes an alternative meta-strategy to the prevailing Western liberal order. This is why geopolitical, strategic and military aspects should be considered in conceptualizing the BRI and beyond economic aspects alone (Banik, 2019). New waterways and port construction serve more than just commercial ends. Ports may serve as military bases for the Chinese navy. For example, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 2017 opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti (Lagneau, 2017). Dispatching 400 troops, the PLA officially claims to support UN peacekeeping operations alongside its own naval operations, particularly in the Indian Ocean. China's military presence, of course, not only concerns the USA but India.

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Sino-Indian relations are already tense as a result of disagreements over territories in the Himalayas, among other issues. CPEC passes through high-risk areas such as the autonomous region of Xinjiang and the northwest Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. The Chinese army is, in fact, busy securing construction sites, transport roads and ports along the corridor. In this context, BRI is a strategy that serves Chinese security interests alongside revitalizing the Silk Road's business opportunities to companies both in Asia and in Europe. There are ties, however, which may make it hard to engage in conflict, nevertheless, two factors are significant here: (1) BRI is an ideological tool designed to maintain stability and strengthen China's domestic order, i.e. control by the CPC, whilst (2) extending a spatial strategy that intertwines both civil and military interests under a "security" banner.

## **BRI maintains domestic order**

As the West searches for a new vision, China extended its geopolitical strategy. The Capitalist system was introduced to China in 1978 with its opening to foreign investment, and when peasants were granted permission to keep surplus production. By unleashing its citizens' entrepreneurial spirit, China hoped to overcome its technical and technological backwardness (Banik, 2019). Mobilization of the Chinese population bolstered national unity in keeping with the motto of becoming rich and prosperous. After years of economic growth and accumulated wealth, the CPC is today using BRI to justify its authority by ensuring party unity, internal stability and national cohesion. President Xi strengthens his position through the patriotic support of the population.

All the while, the authoritarian regime has tightened its grip through certain social controls. Internationally, the Chinese economy is an integral, even essential, part of global production. Remarkably, China is also becoming a source of digital innovation, especially in the field of artificial intelligence. Externally, China flexes its muscles in the South China Sea and elsewhere, transforming "islets in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos into military bases, where the government is building ports and airstrips" (RFI, 2017). Assured by its strong geopolitical position, the Chinese government embarks on an increasingly assertive foreign policy. Domestically, the government manages the economy as an integrated enterprise. Five-year plans set economic strategies of Chinese state-owned enterprises, both internally and externally, to ensure increasing living standards. Providing social goods in this way legitimates the CPC's authority and rule. The BRI's vision thus mobilizes citizens and safeguards national unity, stability and harmony at the domestic level and beyond.

## **BRI as a novel spatial security arrangement**

The BRI is above all a "geostrategic-military" initiative as it brings together civil and military interests under the rubric of "security." We argue here that the BRI is more accurately characterized as a novel spatial security arrangement. To treat the BRI this way is conceptually useful because intertwining interests of spatiality are at the center of almost all decisions and actions amongst BRI's political and economic actors. Despite this BRI, in our view, constitutes a novel spatial security arrangement – by referring to BRI under the umbrella of "security" instead – China's political strategy safeguards domestic and geopolitical interests concurrently. With such an understanding, several dimensions of "security" can be differentiated: national sovereignty and national unification, along with military, economic, cultural, social, scientific and technological security, as well as the security of information, security of environment and resources and, finally, nuclear security (State of Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The main objective of this major security strategy is to preserve the country's unity, prevent social unrest and legitimate the power of President Xi and the CPC. In fact, Xi Jinping's proposal to former US President Obama that they jointly strive to develop a new global order in which China and the US respect "one another's core interests;" (Allison, 2018) meant for Xi a mutual respect for an emerging spatial security arrangement that is now enacted via the BRI.

The BRI is reshaping geopolitical ties between China and those connected to the BRI, whilst China and the US are pursuing a strategy that places national interests at the center of their interactions. The United States and Trump's "America first" vision, the strengthening of the authoritarian regime in China, the new cult of personality surrounding Xi Jinping, akin to Mao's personality cult, are all driven by domestic factors within a logic of an emerging spatial security arrangement enhanced by the BRI which is neither simply economic nor military. Moreover, temporal factors cannot be overlooked, the BRI changes the foundations of world trade in the medium term and, at the same time, is a

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project that will take decades to take shape. This poses a particular hard challenge for the disunited EU since China, as discussed, links its civil, economic and military interests through the BRI.

China's influence and geopolitical–military power could thus take on a greater significance in this novel spatial security arrangement with ramifications impacting Europe and especially Eastern Europe. That is why it is crucial to view the BRI as an action that enables China to modernize state owned companies, facilitate their financing by promoting access to markets along the BRI, and thus strengthen China's version of state-directed capitalism. The improved prosperity of the countries along the BRI routes stabilize China's trade regime, a key quality given that its economy depends on export markets. Although a myriad of factors are unfolding within this emergent spatial security framework, it is equally clear that its consequences cannot yet be fully assessed.

## Re-bundling Territoriality through the BRI

The thinker G. Ruggie, on the eve of the 21st century, stated that we entered an era characterized by processes concerning the unbundling of territoriality. Ruggie, and other scholars, outline and describe a world of states that is becoming fluid with overlapping sovereign arrangements and multiple non-state actors. A landscape, Ruggie argued, that exists on:

a deeper and more extended temporal plane, and its remaking involves a shift not in the paly of power politics but of the stage on which that play is performed (Ruggie, 1993).

Building on Ruggie, we argue that the BRI constitutes a novel spatial security arrangement. As we underscore, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, the BRI constitutes a novel stage on which an unbundling of territorial space takes place. Through it, China pursues domestic stability, economic growth and military interests; all the while aiming to 're-bundle' territory along the BRI into a distinctive Chinese bouquet.

As the pace of globalization slows and populist sentiments resurge, the need and desire of peoples to belong to a territory, region or nation has not waned. The dynamics of transnational flows erase neither borders nor the places delimited by those borders (Zajec, 2016). On the contrary, it is clear that geopolitical powers of nation-states such as China, the USA, and Russia are alive and well. This reassertion of states is accompanied by personality cults (e.g. those surrounding Xi and Putin) and of ideologies guided by national interests and territorial annexations. BRI, at this point of history, apart from serving the pursuit of the Chinese dream, points to consider questions of spatial conquest by means other than war and military force alone. The strategy behind Trump's "America first" campaign follows a similar logic, aiming to revitalize patriotism while extending a sphere of influence. Indeed, we agree, being an effective hegemon requires a shared vision on intersecting economic, political, military, social and cultural levels. With all that said, world politics is at a crossroads. Globalization in its current form, gave rise to a new, potentially highly conflictual bipolar world, one that requires a redefinition of world order. The resulting rivalry plays out on several levels:

- Institutional: Democratic system versus authoritarian regime, even dictatorships.
- National versus transnational forces.
- Nation-states versus global companies, business alliances and interest groups (lobbying).
- Within the EU: Nation-states versus European institutions, and Western Europe versus Eastern Europe (Banik, 2019)

In order to systematically analyse these competitive forces, it is essential to unpack causal factors avoiding ad hoc or, even worse, simplistic solutions, such as those advocated by populists on social networks daily. Instead, we must reset our mindset and have the audacity and imagination to sketch a global governance system that is more equitable and responsive to current challenges and humanity's future (Banik 2020). The crucial question is: How can we integrate these two systems of opposing values into a new structure ensuring global cosmopolitical governance? French geopolitics scholarship provide us with part of the approach. It was Jacques Ancel (1879–1943) who added a human concept – the identity of the heart – to geopolitical considerations (Ancel 1938, 97-99; Gauchon 2008, 11-12). His concept is based on the need for balance and harmony within a society, country or region (Banik 2020).

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## Beyond borders: Identity of the heart

Leaders of European institutions should not underestimate member states' national strengths and respective population's interests. According to this logic, Jacques Ancel contributed the notion of identity to studying geopolitics whereby groups emerge through building a common memory, history, culture and language, eventually defining themselves within a border: "He defends a nation of the heart in and of itself that is non-rational" (Gauchon and Huissoud, 2008). In this sense, the EU can act as an avant-garde player, questioning a power's sustainability – values versus mercantilism. A new "cosmopolitical" order of this sort must ensure fair trade, transparency of transactions, social justice and, above all, a more equitable distribution of natural resources and goods globally. Specifically, underscoring the human dimension and application of moral and ethical values are essential towards a cosmopolitics, a view that respects territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Banik, 2016).

In our globalized world, neither the EU, China nor the US are isolated island paradises. No actor is privy to an absolute truth. Climate change, growing global competition (for natural resources, food, water, etc.), the rivalry between national and transnational forces and, international terrorism force states to face extraterritorial realities. In this vain, illusions underlying prevailing ideologies (those found in Europe; patriotic Chinese-style capitalism; "America first"; personality cults; a return to revisionist power structures) must be relinquished and difference be bridged by moving towards a cosmopolitical global governance based on human values — an "identity of the heart". As the BRI slowly begins to connect Asia and Europe, let us begin by further developing a "Europe of the heart" beyond Europe itself and by keeping Ancel's geopolitical vision: "It is the heart which is worthwhile and which must be considered above all."

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