

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative or BRI (Chinese: 一带一路) is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. It refers to the entire geographical area of the historic "Silk Road" trade route, which has been used in antiquity. More than 60% of the world's population and approximately 35% of the global economy might be affected by the time of the BRI's planned completion in 2049. To date, more than 130 countries have issued endorsements, but there has also been concern over the project being a form of neocolonialism. Some analysts believe it to be a way to extend Chinese economic and political influence.

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Most recently, the lines of analysis of the BRI have been excessively proliferating, which turns the topic into an unexpectedly broad field of research. It can be approached from six main angles: historical, geographical, ecological, political, economic, and architectural. This issue of the GSC Newsletter Meridian aims to compress the diverse landscape of BRI research into a readable survey in order to present, in the most succinct fashion, a variety of aspects and analyses.

GUANIE LIM

The Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: Looking Back, Moving Forward.

Grounding its analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative within Southeast Asia, China's 'near abroad', this paper makes two arguments. Firstly, Chinese investment has not outcompeted that of the region's traditional investors. Secondly, local actors have largely set the agenda on some of the initiative's megadeals.

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W(h)ither China in Africa. The BRI has framed much discussion about Sino-African relations in recent years but has undergone a dramatic contraction. This contribution argues that geopolitics and aid will become more important in Sino-African relations in the coming years.

ALESSANDRO ARDUINO AND MARIO RASETTI

The Digital Silk Road and the US-China Race for AI. The ability to transfer data at high speed and extract value from it are at the heart of the ongoing competition between China and the US. In this respect, Beijing's Digital Silk Road aims to place China at the center of the fourth industrial revolution.

ANDREEA BRINZA

The Winding Road of the BRI in the Central Eastern European (CEE) Region. The BRI is better described as a branding strategy for China's foreign policy and overseas investments, than a geopolitical masterplan. The relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe, as part of the 16+1 mechanism, illustrate this very well.

ALICIA GARCIA-HERRERO

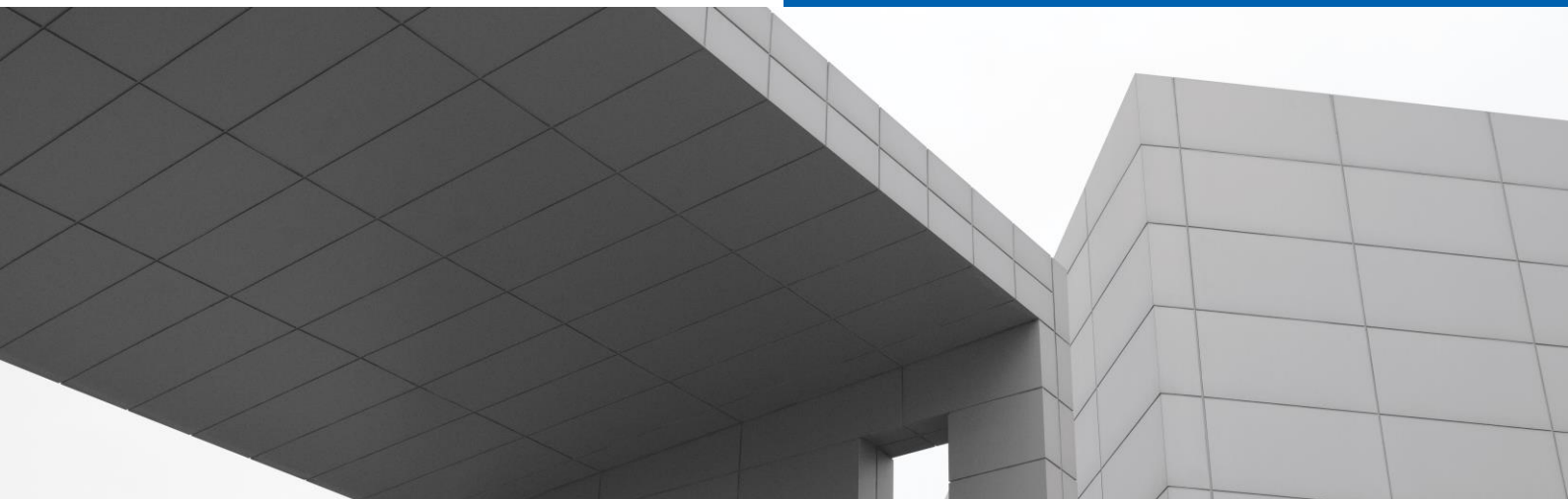
China's Investment in the Middle East: Where do We Stand? China has become a key economic partner globally, also in the Middle Eastern countries. However, while trade ties continue to grow, China's outbound investment has decelerated sharply since 2018. This is seen even more in the Middle East where data clearly shows a retrenchment of China.

EMILIAN KAVALSKI

What's Next for the Nearly Decade-Old BRI? The BRI will soon be marking its ten-year anniversary. Yet, instead of the promised "community of shared destiny," it has polarized global opinion on China. The COVID-19 pandemic has further reinforced how divisive China's outreach has become. The article discusses the prospective trajectories of the BRI in this volatile environment.

SOHRAB AHMED MARRI

China's Architectural cooperation in Pakistan Through the BRI. The Gwadar Port and Free Zone are the core projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Chinese architects negotiated their professional practice to follow the guidelines of Chinese state authorities as well as the guidelines, expectations, and suggestions of the local state authorities.



TANVEER AHMED KHAN

The Geopolitical Strings of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Pakistan has a strategic location in South Asia: it has China to the north, central Asia to the east, and the Arabian Sea to the south. The newly constructed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the vital flagship program under the Belt and Road initiative, which is supposed to be a win-win situation for both China and Pakistan.

QINNA SHEN

The New Silk Road and EU-China Relations through Jiny Lan's Visual Art. The Chinese-German visual artist Jiny Lan combines themes from western and eastern cultures to illustrate the multifacetedness of the New Silk Road and suggests that Chinese authoritarianism presents the biggest challenge to the connectivity between China and Europe.

ARTICLES

GUANIE LIM

The Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: Looking Back, Moving Forward

It has been slightly more than 9 years since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Widely seen as China's foremost diplomatic and economic strategy in engaging with the external world, just how much has this belief materialized? More importantly, how has the initiative been received by the host economies? First and foremost, there is a need to qualify what constitutes as 'influence' and/or 'impact'. One way of approximating this is in the analysis of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) vis-à-vis those of the other Global North economies. In Southeast Asia, China's 'near abroad', recent research demonstrates that Chinese FDI is considerably 'smaller' than what popular rhetoric

suggests (Lim, 2019). Firstly, Chinese outward FDI, while increasing in value, is not more significant than the region's traditional investors such as Japan and the EU. If anything, its rate of increase exhibits a considerably choppy trajectory than those of the traditional investors. This implies that there remains some stumbling block before China can usurp the region's pre-existing political economic order.

Relatedly, unlike the traditional investors which mainly invest in manufacturing industries, FDI from China has been primarily channeled towards tertiary industries such as real estate. Although these activities also contribute to economic output, they tend to be narrowly focused on industries that have relatively lower multiplier effects on the host economies. Take real estate for example, it often contains a significant element of speculation, lopsided distribution of economic gains, and a lack of sustained local employment. This potentially creates more losers than winners in the recipient economies, not least those already suffering from high levels of inequality and social discontent. This was witnessed in the Forest City project in southern Malaysia. This project – encompassing four manmade islands sprawled over 1,386 ha of land – is one of the largest Chinese projects in Malaysia. However, the project's exorbitant cost and enclaved nature has drawn the ire of politicians who allege that its fruition is harmful to national development. Subsequent politicizing has further diminished Forest City's appeal in the eyes of the business community, contributing to a massive slowdown in its development (Liu and Lim, 2019).

Secondly, massive, ambitious BRI undertakings cannot be decoupled from local level agency. This goes back to on the ground reality – projects cannot take place if there is insufficient support from host level stakeholders. Analyzing some of the most prominent Chinese-financed railway projects in Southeast Asia, Camba (2020) argues that their fruition is crucially dependent on the formation of a coalition that amalgamates political, economic, and organizational resources from the relevant actors, both from within and outside the host economies. More importantly, such a coalition is subject to change and could be fractured when domestic dissenting forces reach a critical mass. When this happens, the projects are likely to face delays (or worse, downright cancellation) (see also Calabrese and Cao, 2021). The need to unpack the goals and machinations of the domestic elites – at the central and subnational levels – is also underlined in research covering the Sino-Thai railway interlinking Bangkok and Thailand's rural, north-eastern provinces (Aiyara, 2019). The project was promoted especially by the Yingluck Shinawatra administration (2011–2014) because the railway route traversed major vote banks in Thailand's northeast, its traditional stronghold. In addition to promising the voters higher economic growth and a more convenient transportation means, the administration also signaled to the provincial politicians and business elites that they too stand to gain from higher land prices and rents when the project is completed. This railway, despite allegations of pork barrel politics, has remained a priority for successive post-Yingluck administrations.

The overarching thesis here is that there needs to be a concerted attempt to go beyond large-scale geopolitical narratives that depict the BRI under sweeping, uncritical themes. Observing how the initiative has unraveled in Southeast Asia thus far, it can be argued that seemingly small states have captured economic benefits while preserving some level of independence in the face of gigantic BRI projects. By the same token, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that FDI from China is overtaking those of the region's traditional players. The agenda, as we move forward in the 2020s, is how best to explore in more nuanced terms the BRI's intertwining with the local political economy.

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PÁDRAIG CARMODY

W(h)ither China in Africa?

China's relations with Africa are in a period of flux. This is driven by the dramatic scaling back of lending under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in recent years, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent greater importance of Chinese soft power projection on the continent. What will future China-Africa relations look like post-COVID and how will the legacy and impacts of previous rounds of engagement affect them?

The BRI, announced in 2013, is Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy initiative and was touted by him as the "project of the century". It is a major program of infrastructure construction, amongst other elements, around the world. It was driven by the twin and related desires or imperatives to create new markets and vent surplus Chinese capacity overseas thereby contributing to the country's continued ascent in

the international system. As such it conforms to what geography David Harvey refers to as a "spatial fix" where the contradiction between the highly developed forces of production in China and its still relatively low wages, resulting in lack of adequate markets, are reconciled through displacement to other territories. Harvey notes that spatial fixes are always unstable, however the BRI appeared to reach an early apogee in 2016 after which loan funding for ports, railroads and other projects around the world essentially collapsed. 'Lending by the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China collapsed from a peak of \$75bn in 2016 to just \$4bn last year' (Wheatley and Kynge 2020). What explains this dramatic contraction?

The BRI is an inherently contradictory meta-project partly because it is both geoeconomic and geopolitical. China sought to use it to both alleviate domestic economic problems and embed allies around the world, thereby ensuring its continued ascent in the international system and re-orienting the global system to the East. However the geopolitical impetus meant that investment and loan appraisals were often loose, often resulting in under-performing projects, as has often been the case in China itself. This has sometimes been referred to as a form of "debt trap diplomacy", however this is to misunderstand the dynamics at play.

The construction of a debt trap to reduce borrower sovereignty implies intentionality, whereas this, for the most part, appears not have been the primary motivation. Nonetheless the BRI has in some cases been implicated in the construction of debt traps in specific places. For example, by the end of 2017 China already accounted for about 44% of Zambia's debt (CARI cited in Ofstad and Tjønneland, 2019), exhibiting features of moral hazard where politicians take out debt for short-term economic and political gain to the longer-term detriment of the public good. Zambia subsequently became the first African country in recent times to effectively default on its overseas debts.

Such debt traps and public concern over often under-performing projects has resulted in a dramatic scaling back of BRI funding globally and in Africa. However, China has engaged in substantial so-called "mask diplomacy" on the continent during the COVID-19 pandemic, through donations of vaccines and personal protective equipment for example, while Western powers have largely engaged in vaccine nationalism. This has burnished China's reputation on the continent and is complimentary to other Chinese soft power efforts in recent years (Benabdallah, 2019). There are also reports that Chinese oil companies are diversifying supplies away from the continent as a risk reduction strategy.

The reduction of BRI lending to the continent, and reduced exports to China, with exports from Africa falling by nearly a quarter in 2020 all suggest a shift in focus from geoeconomics to geopolitics in Sino-African relations, even as the continent remains a

crucial supplier of raw materials. Also even as primary commodity exports from the continent to China fell in 2020, Chinese exports to Africa continued to rise (Nyabiage, 2020) suggesting its continued importance as a market destination, necessitating continued good political relations. All of this suggest potential greater importance of aid as a vector of engagement in future Sino-African relations, although the contradictions which gave rise to the BRI still remain unresolved, with potential to destabilize the Chinese economy further. If that happens the seemingly immutable rise of China in Africa, even if the emphasis on different vectors of engagement shifts through time, would be dramatically undermined.

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ALESSANDRO ARDUINO AND MARIO RASETTI

The Digital Silk Road and the US-China Race for AI

In 2015 Beijing launched the Digital Silk Road (DSR) [1] as a strategic component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ongoing competition between Beijing and Washington for digital hegemony reached the state of open confrontation during the Trump administration. However, US anxiety over the DSR is not changed during the Biden administration. While the preceding US "Clean Network Initiative" [2], led by former Secretary of State Pompeo to purge Chinese technology from all the allied countries' military and civilian networks, seems moving on under the "Rip and Replace" program, most of the world countries are waiting to figure out which way the wind is blowing.

While the alleged winds of war between China and the United States blow only from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, what happens in cyberspace will have the most severe repercussions. From a business point of view, in case of a decoupling of digital ecosystems,

companies will have to operate in a world deeply divided by incompatible and mutually exclusive communication systems. Countries and companies will have to choose between technologies made in China or in the West, and what in the previous year could have been a decision based on technology necessities and economic efficiency, is going to be linked to geopolitics.

While several African or even Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, do not have many options outside of the Chinese digital ecosystem [3], the rest of the countries involved in the Digital Silk Road are trying to weigh the benefits of using Chinese technology, in potential disagreement with American efforts to block the adoption of such systems.

The ability to transfer data at high speed and extract value from it are at the heart of this balancing act, which in Europe and Japan have already achieved a marked political connotation in their choices. It's not a secret that Beijing's Digital Silk Road aims to place China at the center of the fourth industrial revolution. This revolution includes digital security, e-commerce and financial services, smart city integration, undersea fiber optic cables, and the Beidou satellite navigation system.

Certainly, however, it is not implied that the Chinese advantage will automatically translate into a benefit in global leadership in innovation. This is because on the one hand the leadership in AI research is not necessarily durable, on the contrary we must not forget that it is rather fragile: AI does not yet have rock-solid foundations (it does not have a real theory that supports it) and therefore the forward thrust of academic research is subject to sudden and abrupt changes when a newcomer is unexpectedly successful. But, on the other hand, for China, aiming at a solid progress in these sectors will put the country in front of crucial choices concerning its development model.

Today the competition is linked above all to the great challenge of the so-called 'quantum supremacy'. The latter has come to the fore because a recent result obtained at the Almadéen IBM Labs has proven that no classical bit can be encoded in a cluster of fewer than six atoms. This apparently cryptic statement means that the process of progressive miniaturization on which the entire ICT technology industry relies starts facing the risk of reaching its natural limit, after which it cannot but 'go quantum'. The United States, joined by Europe with its 'Quantum Flagship' project, have embarked for their quantum computer –destined to revolutionize in a profound and total manner our way of computing and its scope– the road of super-conductor technologies at very low temperatures; China, instead, has chosen the quantum optics approach. [4]

It will be a titanic clash, a battle played out on the almost intangible field of the mysterious and elusive laws of quantum physics. The most complex, subtle and counterintuitive physics will be the ring for a

confrontation in which the greatest economic and commercial, but also cultural and political games of the new millennium will be played. Only in the most advanced labs in the world a possible way out of the dilemma, spintronics, starts to peep out: here there is room also for countries such as Japan with a scientific culture so advanced as to challenge the two superpowers; no one has so far picked up the gauntlet.

One area that will be crucial to settle will be the need to conform to clear and shareable policies in terms of ethics and regulations, an issue on which both of these two great powers are genuinely defective. This issue will in fact, require China to adjust its political model, shifting at least in part that center of gravity generated by the fact that almost all patents and discoveries come from a university totally financed by the state; the United States to educate its users and investors to a vision less of "lots of money and now" but of a deeper commitment to fundamental research –open even though developed in the private sector– with a higher rate of attention to collective values.

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The Winding Road of the BRI in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) Region

China's BRI has been a blank space where anybody could fill in their definition of what the initiative actually represents. From a mega-infrastructure plan, a masterplan for global influence, a Marshall Plan or even a debt trap, it has now been 8 years during which the BRI traveled a winding road and showed the limits of a relatively undefined and ambiguous initiative.

If, at the beginning, the BRI was mainly perceived through the positive optic of investments and development, over the past four years, the image of the BRI has deteriorated to such an extent that attaching the label to projects no longer generates enthusiasm but rather criticism. This change of perspective was also spurred by the growing US-China rivalry and amplified a wave of disappointment among European countries, especially those from the 16+1 mechanism, which was inaugurated by China almost a decade ago.

The 16+1 mechanism was formed in 2012 by China and 16 countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Greece joined in 2019, transforming it into the 17+1, but Lithuania has recently left the mechanism, illustrating the disappointment that has emerged in these parts of Europe. While attracted by hopes of investments and trade, dozens of promises at summits over the years failed to materialize.

Established before the Belt and Road, the 16+1 mechanism was placed under the BRI umbrella. The BRI gathers a myriad of projects and proposals under the aura of the "Silk Road," many of them old Chinese projects that were rebranded as "Belt and Road" in order to enhance the allure of the initiative. Such projects would have been or were implemented even without the BRI. Thus, the Belt and Road is more about creating a branding strategy for China's foreign policy and overseas investments [1] than a mega-infrastructure project, as it is often perceived.

The Port of Piraeus is hailed as the BRI's biggest success story in Europe, but the initiative had no place in COSCO's calculus to take over the port, which was mainly driven by commercial interests and preceded the BRI's launch. In search of profit, COSCO invested in the port and transformed it into a success story, later placed under the BRI brand. Projects in other places had a similar fate.

But sometimes, the brand was the only tangible outcome. The Budapest-Belgrade railway, the flagship BRI project in Europe, didn't succeed in scoring points in favor of China. Although it was meant to be implemented with the most China-friendly governments in Europe, those of Hungary

and Serbia, it is still nowhere near completion, with only a few kilometers built, even though it was first proposed in 2013. While recently China, Serbia and Hungary marked the beginning of the construction of a new section of the railway, [2] the finished kilometers in Serbia [3] were built by a Russian company, not by a Chinese one. Apart from the Budapest-Belgrade railway, Hungary doesn't host any important BRI project and its relations with China are mainly the work of prime minister Viktor Orbán, who is using them as leverage to deal with the European Union.

In other cases in Europe, instead of a disappointment, the BRI even attracted intense criticism, as in the case of the Montenegro highway. [4] Accusations of debt traps, lack of high standards and environmental issues haunted the Chinese project in this Balkan country, whose new government has criticized the project. [5]

Montenegro wasn't the only country where China, through the BRI, failed to deliver its promises. In many other CEE countries, almost all of whom had signed BRI memoranda of understanding with China, there is no trace of the BRI or of large-scale Chinese investments. Without strong economic links to China, some CEE countries have been able to afford turning their backs and even to adopt a more critical stance towards Beijing. For example, Romania was the first country to sign a 5G MoU with the United States targeting Huawei, then implementing it into national law; it also abandoned a \$8 billion Chinese investment in the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant after years of negotiations — a project never branded as BRI, as it was mired in uncertainty — and then restricted the access of Chinese companies to public infrastructure tenders altogether.

Today, with this wave of disappointment throughout the CEE, it is more difficult for China to develop and improve its relations with Europe. And with all the new infrastructure initiatives, like the Global Gateway or Build Back Better World (B3W), the BRI has entered a period of competition, as it is perceived in the European Union as an unreliable initiative that doesn't respect high quality standards, or even as a debt trap.

The BRI was meant to provide a positive brand for China's foreign policy, revolving around the mythical, peaceful image of the Silk Road, but years of ambiguity, unfulfilled promises, and questionable projects have transformed the BRI into a negative brand, at least in Europe and the West. So, while China is trying to change its image by placing more emphasis on greener projects and higher standards, it will take a lot of effort to rebuild its appeal.

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China's Investment in the Middle East: Where Do We Stand?

China has become central to economies in the Middle East with widening economic and political ties. The most obvious facet of the closer relationship was expected in trade, which has grown increasingly unbalanced. For oil-exporting economies, imports grew faster than exports particularly after the collapse in oil prices in late 2014 but the situation has improved somewhat recently. For oil importers in the Middle East, bilateral trade deficits with China are growing fast.

Beyond the larger – but more imbalanced trade links – China has also become a very large global investor from 2010 onwards and accelerated trade until 2017. Part of this investment drive has had as key driving force the Belt and Road Initiative. However, regarding acquisition of companies overseas rather than lending, the main target was the developed world, starting with the US until the Trump administration imposed stricter regulatory barriers to limit China's merger and acquisitions (M&A) in the US. Since then, Europe has become the main target for China's M&A while the emerging world remained much less of a target, especially when excluding Asia. Since 2018 China has clearly retrenched as a global acquirer of companies and when it does invest, it tends to focus on smaller targets, generally below the radar, especially in the West. One could imagine that the increasingly strict screening of Chinese acquisitions in the US and, more recently in Europe, may have pushed China to find targets in the developing world, including in the Middle East but this is not what we find in the data.

In fact, as both the Chinese and Middle Eastern economies continued slowing down, the investment enthusiasm waned after 2017 and then decelerated

rapidly. This is also the case for Chinese investment in Middle East, which echoed the generally decelerating trend of China's overseas investment in recent years. Specially, China's investment in Middle East declined sharply from more than \$5.2 billion in 2016 to \$2.1 billion in 2018, and then to only \$300 million in 2019 and \$100 million in 2020, respectively.

There are many reasons for this trend. First and foremost, the Chinese economy has been decelerating quite rapidly since 2018 and, even more so, since the pandemic. As a result, the additional room for investment in abroad has shrunk. Secondly, the pandemic itself has had virtually stopped traveling into and out of China, making Chinese investment overseas much more difficult.

It should be noted, though, that this data only shows China's direct investment into the Middle East and excludes that of Hong Kong and other financial centers which happens to be very large but for which no breakdown is available. Beyond M&A, China's greenfield investment overseas fared better but that was mainly because it came from a much smaller base. The total value of China's greenfield investment into the Middle East was less than \$1 billion in 2016, climbing up to \$2 to \$3 billion in the next two years until it dropped again to less than \$200 million in 2020.

Development finance is another aspect to consider when looking at China's investment in the Middle East. The Middle East is an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with nearly all the 18 countries participating in the BRI. At the peak, China's development finance increased to \$16.8 billion in 2016, but it kept decreasing ever since then and is hardly existent since the Covid pandemic started.

Looking at these trends, it is important to note that China's overall retrenchment from its massive global investment, is more acute in the Middle East. The share of the Middle East in China's total overseas investment has declined across the board. More specifically, this is true for all three key types of investment, namely, M&A, Greenfield and development finance. On country breakdown, Iran was the biggest recipient of China's development finance, but nearly all of these large projects happened during 2016 and 2017. Israel tops China's M&A activities, and the situation remained so even in 2020, with two deals taking place in industrial and ICT sectors. The UAE has been the largest target for China's Greenfield investment.

As regards the sectoral breakdown of China's investment, transport, ICT and energy are clearly the preferred ones. Still, over the past few years, China's interest in infrastructure investment enthusiasm has been fading and so has its interest in the transportation sector in the Middle East. Instead, China has expressed interest in the ICT sector but increased scrutiny on data collection and management in both

China and in the Middle East has made this difficult.

All in all, it seems unlikely that China's investment in the region will increase drastically in the next few years as China needs to deploy its savings domestically in light of a rapidly decelerating economy.

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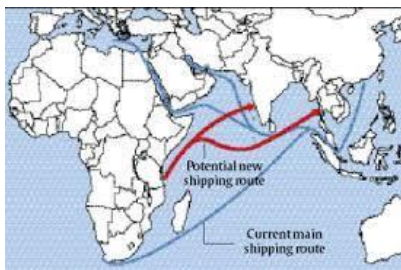
What Next for the Nearly Decade-Old BRI?

When Mr. Xi Jinping announced in 2013 the launch of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" few would have expected that this would amount to anything more than policy sloganeering of a new leader seeking to establish his foreign policy credentials. Yet, in less than a decade these pronouncements have spawned a diverse and variegated platform for exporting not just Chinese goods, but also Beijing's influence abroad. Very quickly, these two projects became central to what in Chinese is still labelled as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR). Around 2015, the Chinese government decided that the English-language label for the project should be the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In hindsight, one might read such change in appellation as the first indication of what Beijing calls today the "double circulation" economy. Regardless of whether one calls it OBOR or BRI, however, the initiative's core aim of establishing an Afro-Eurasian "community of shared destiny" through large-scale infrastructure projects has remained unchanged. Reasserting this objective, in 2017 China began developing a "Polar Silk Road" exploiting the economic opportunities provided by the opening of the Northern passage as well as buttressing Beijing's claim as a "near-Arctic state." Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China launched a "Health Silk Road" channeling the supply of essential medical equipment and vaccines.

Unprecedented in its scale and ambition, the BRI has positioned Beijing at the heart of the shifting global order, through the establishment of China-centric physical, financial, cultural, technological, and political connectivity. As is to be expected such incursion into the established patterns of global interactions has been profoundly polarizing. The COVID-19 outbreak has only made conspicuous how divisive China's presence has become. To proponents, the BRI offers a viable and meaningful alternative to Western-led international institutions and organizations. With "mutual benefit" as a motto, the Chinese government aims to counter the image of a remote benefactor, associated with

Western powers and their modes of foreign direct investment. In fact, the BRI operationalizes China as a veritable model for international leadership and demonstrates the hypocrisy of the so-called “rules-based” liberal world order which has ensured the post-World War II dominance of the Global North. For detractors, the BRI represents just another neo-colonial project ensnaring vulnerable countries around the world in “debt trap” bondage to China. Under the guise of “win-win” scenarios, China is assertively acquiring what it lacks while selling what it has – none of which helps local development. Thus, the BRI becomes just another tool for Beijing’s “wolf warrior diplomacy,” which is assertively staking China’s hegemony over global patterns of economic and political interactions.

Such polarization has ushered in a significant politicization of relations with China in many of the countries along the BRI. Such localization of Chinese investments is probably one of the unexpected effects of the BRI. Thus, while traditional divisions – such as the one between the left and the right of the political spectrum – still pertain, pro- and anti-China sentiments are also emerging as one of the key distinctions between political formations. Another outcome of the BRI has been the unprecedented pushback from major regional and global powers. This has led to a proliferation of alternative connectivity projects countering Chinese investments. For instance, Japan and India are promoting the “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor,” the United States is championing the “Build Back Better World,” while the European Union has launched its own “Global Gateway” initiative. It seems that routing around Beijing is the key characteristic of all such project. While such counteraction is probably to be expected, one of the less palatable effects for Beijing is the growth in negative public opinion. With the exception of Africa, opinion polls around the world demonstrate that despite the largesse of the BRI, China has failed to win friends. It would appear that apart from threats or coercion, Beijing still has little soft power or legitimacy around the world.



Asia Africa Growth Corridor

In this respect, the next 12 months will be critical for the future of the BRI. It is highly unlikely that a Chinese government which is increasingly preoccupied with its own regime stability and perceiving any form of criticism as an existential

threat will be able to redress the concerns of the BRI’s detractors. It seems that the BRI is destined to become a much leaner project targeting strategic acquisitions (such as infrastructure hubs, energy, and technology) and rewarding countries (or rather regimes) that have proven to be China’s true all-weather friends. Consequently, the initiative’s “community of shared destiny” will likely become quite exclusive – that is, increasingly open only to those that side with China and its version of the “mutual complementarity” underpinning the BRI.

At the same time, there’s another important takeaway from all of this: The narrative that the world is facing a new Cold War between China and the West needs a reality check. A Cold War needs two powerful protagonists able to act on the global stage. And while China may be growing into an economic, military and technological giant, the “hegemon in the making” is much more vulnerable and isolated than it likes to pretend.

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SOHRAB AHMED MARRI

China's Architectural Cooperation in Pakistan through the BRI



Figure 1: The first design proposal of Gwadar Free Zone Business Center Source: Image by Wang Qian

Few writings deal with the architectural cooperation between China and the global south in the context of the BRI. [1] Much literature highlights the North-South relations in architecture and urban planning from colonial times to the post-war period, and also the current contemporary period of globalization. [2] The BRI, with regard to geopolitics, economic trade, and international politics, presents new East-South relations. This incites curiosity about how the architectural exchanges and cooperations are

different. The question is difficult to answer; however, it leads us at least to rethink some aspects such as “transcultural architecture” (Botz-Bornstein 2016), “respect of otherness” (Akcan 2016), and the “clash of cosmopolitanism vs. localism” (King 2004). One also needs to consider insights from case studies.

What are Chinese architects exporting? China has received Western architecture models which were translated into a Chinese context, and now it is exporting architecture to the Global South. Any center-periphery theory does not work here.

The new silk road is inspired by the concept of the old silk road as it promotes harmonious architecture, culture, and knowledge exchanges. The BRI model involves government-to-government cooperation, and architectural knowledge flows under mutually established guidelines and surveillance and encourages the inclusion of local voices in architecture (Marri 2021).

The Gwadar Business Center

The Gwadar Port and Free Zone is the core project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor. It is being developed by Chinese state owned companies. The Gwadar Business Center of the Free Zone is a monumental project financed, designed and constructed by CCCC (China Communication and Construction Company) Ltd. It is a comprehensive service center with offices, accommodation, catering, leisure, and security facilities. The target customer groups are Chinese customers going to Gwadar for business, but the center will also facilitate Pakistani and other international customers. [3]



Figure 2: Green Domes series of arches, the second design proposal of Gwadar Free Zone Business Center Source: COPHC office.

Several architectural design proposals were made and discussed with a local working group comprising project managers, politicians, economists, engineers, planners, and architects. The technical working group of China mostly comprised representatives from the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the architects, engineers, and project managers from Chinese construction companies. Their interaction creates a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1991) between the two cultures. The contact zone initiates dialogue in

the architectural exchanges of knowledge regarding different interests, movement of ideas, and construction methodologies.



Figure 3: The modified and final version of GBC models source: COPHC office Gwadar

In this ‘contact zone’, the final design was repeatedly improved through discussions with the help of local experts. For instance, one proposal consisted of more arches and domes, with the latter colored in green. The designers probably thought to have expressed the local sentiment because green is the color of the flag of Pakistan. However, these green domes represent specific sects of Muslims in Pakistan and are mostly used in mosques, making the suggested approach irrational. Thus, in the final design, the green domes were omitted, and the number of arches and domes were reduced to give it a more contemporary outlook. A beige and brown color scheme that resembles the Gwadar vernacular mud architecture was used.

This eclectic architecture of the Gwadar Business Center is held in regard by the local people as it will enhance the image of Gwadar and bring prosperity. The architecture projects under the BRI are not merely architectural exports from China but also cross-cultural exchanges. Chinese architects negotiated their professional practice to follow the guidelines of the Chinese state authorities as well as the guidelines, expectations, and suggestions of the local state authorities.

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TANVEER AHMAD KHAN

The Geopolitical Strings of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Geopolitics may be defined what great powers engage in, what they practice, and what they are best at. It is an art as well as a practice of pursuing political power over a given territory. Conventionally, the term geopolitics has been primarily applied to the impact of geography on politics, but over time, it has evolved to encompass wider connotations. Geopolitics is as old as the state itself, asserting that the geographical location, the space, size, and natural resources of a state determine its political position in global politics. In simple terms, geopolitics plays the ultimate role in the making of strategies and policies, which can obstruct or enhance the actions of states in the global domain.

During the Cold War, geopolitics emerged as an important phenomenon when history witnessed two leading powers, namely the United States

and the Soviet Union, who were competing to amplify their areas of influence. While the Soviet Union held the dominant position in Eurasia, the United States abided with the policy of containment to challenge the Soviet's influence. In the post-cold war era after the disintegration of USSR, American foreign policy shifted towards the rising China, which was establishing its political position in global politics. The China Containment policy asserted that US foreign policy aims to diminish the political and economic imprint of China in Asia. This multifaceted policy by the US involves military, economic, and diplomatic ties with countries that fall in the periphery of China. Asia witnessed new geopolitical developments that include a pivot to Asia and increased American involvement in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-US nuclear deal was the latest manifestation of US containment of China as India is a proximate neighbor to China and also has the upper hand in South Asia.

China was once described as a "sleeping giant" and got moved by the surface currents of a power matrix that was aimed to curtail its rise. As China was not strong enough to reshape the power matrixes, it started to follow the policy of Deng Xiaoping: "Hide your strength, bide your time." In order to accumulate strength, Beijing throughout the post-Cold War period made a rigorous effort to modernize the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA). The outstanding economic expansion and military modernization convinced China it can develop into a twenty-first-century superpower.

Under the Presidency of Xi Jinping, China's economic power has provided the rising China tremendous opportunities to engage with the neighboring countries and the world. It also provided an opportunity to challenge US hegemony and India's rise. Beijing's influence will certainly further upset Asia's geopolitical balance. The most important strategic advantage that China possesses is the All-Weather friendship with Pakistan. Based on the Kautliyan maxim of "my enemy's enemy is my friend," the China Pakistan alignment serves the interests of both partners as prompted by their convergence vis a vis India. Both China and Pakistan perceive the growing Indo-US strategic cooperation as a disturbance of the regional power structure as it has shifted the conventional and nuclear balance of power. From the Pakistani perspective, the Indo-US nuclear deal came as a shock as the latter had hitherto been their security and economic guarantor. Pakistan perceived that the nuclear deal would advance India's capability of a pre-emptive attack because the US had recognized India as a nuclear power. The post-Cold War US tilt towards India as an emerging great power gave further impetus and thus provided further excuse to both China and Pakistan to once again strengthen their 'all-weather' and time-tested friendship. Therefore, the mutual anxieties regarding India's emergence as a responsible global power could function as an adhesive between China and Pakistan. It held them more strongly connected. If one closely examines the strategic strings that are attached to it, the CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) is toting up

troubles for India, as it will only swell the capabilities of its arch-rival Pakistan, who faces severe economic and political headaches. CPEC provides a big opportunity to stabilize Pakistan's economy while refining ties with its neighbors and making Gwadar a trade and economic hub of the region.

Thus, even after the end of the cold war, the Sino-Pak alignment survived and in fact got transformed into a formal alliance. This gets exemplified by the much-talked-about CPEC, in which China's investment reached \$62 billion in April 2017. CPEC and the linking of Gwadar Port is an ambitious strategic plan of China's Road and Belt project. Pakistan – situated between India, China, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf – occupies a central place in regional and broader Indo-Pacific geopolitics. In contemporary global politics as well as regional politics of South Asia, the China-Pakistan Axis holds an important place, which does affect both spheres. India, which is garnering its place in its own region as well as beyond, has definite implications ranging from economic to security matters.

Thus, the current China-Pakistan bonhomie in South Asia has tremendous geo-strategic implications for India as an emerging regional as well as global great power. In view of the fact that China and India do not only compete for influence as they operate within the same geographical setting, but that also India and Pakistan are at loggerheads, the latter is determined to change the existing regional balance of power. China's aggressive behavior that India witnessed during the recent standoff in Ladakh and in the South China Sea, opens up the possibility of China dominating South Asia and the peripheral maritime.

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QINNA SHEN

The New Silk Road and EU-China Relations through Jiny Lan's Visual Art



Fig. 1. *Alternative Fiction* (2021) @ Jiny Lan

In a painting produced in 2021 and titled "Alternative Fiction," a giant Buddha statue is transposed into the nave of the La Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona, Spain. The facial features of the Buddha resemble those of Chinese president Xi Jinping, now wearing a bindi. Xi as Buddha alludes to the pervasive cult of personality in contemporary China. The stained-glass rose window above the chancel is patterned after the Chinese national emblem (Fig. 1). This bold artwork by Jiny Lan is representative of the feminist painter whose avant-garde and politically engaged art uniquely fuses Eastern and Western culture. As a German artist of Chinese origin, Lan uses visual language to comment on the New Silk Road and the Chinese government's authoritarianism, which presents a big challenge to the Sino-EU relations.

What inspired Lan to create this painting was the inaugural Silk Road International Cultural Expo (SRDICE) in Dunhuang in September 2016, where she and about 1,500 other foreign guests were invited to participate, all at the expense of the Chinese government. The Chinese hosts did not spare anything to impress foreign guests with their hospitality, wealth, and power. However, Lan is skeptical of the outcome of this costly endeavor. Despite the stunning gala shows, the foreign guests were, according to Lan, put off by a propagandistic

film about the BRI. In her painting, the arms of the dancers look grotesque and ghostly.

In place of an altar, spectators see an emperor and an empress giving an audience, evoking the heyday of Chinese dynastic history when foreign guests from tributary nations came to China and were welcomed with extravagance, as shown in the giant scroll “All Nations Coming to Court” (*Wan guo lai chao*, 1761), a painting of an imagined scene made during the rule of the Qing Emperor Qianlong. Devoid of fanfare, Lan’s painting is actually modeled on a contemporary version of the same title by Wang Yongqiang. [1] A Chinese critic has pointed out that the spectacles of “All Nations Coming to Court” are “extremely costly for the Chinese court. Gigantic vanity projects constitute a feature of all of Chinese history.” [2] The BRI is Xi’s signature foreign policy initiative and reveals China’s ambition to enhance its global influence. In 2017 and 2019, the first two BRI summits conjured up the glory of past Chinese dynasties as expressed in “All Nations Coming to Court.”

China has touted the BRI as a win-win project. It will, or so it is hoped, enable the country to consolidate economic and diplomatic relations with participating countries as well as diversify China’s energy and raw materials sources through economic corridors that circumvent routes controlled by the U.S. and its allies. The German ambassador to China, Michael Clauss, has supported the BRI. [3] Hans von Helldorff, Speaker of the Board of the Federal Association of the German Silk Road Initiative (BVDSI), said in an interview with Xinhua that the BRI has been creating opportunities and new markets for German enterprises. [4] For this reason, some have likened the BRI to the Marshall Plan. But as McKinsey reports, the Marshall Plan was one-twelfth the size of what is being contemplated for the BRI. [5] One of the BRI’s overland routes extends from China to Western Europe, with Duisburg as a major terminal, a city located in the Ruhr region that suffered an economic decline in the 1980s and 1990s. [6]

International critics of the BRI have focused on the lack of transparency, potential debt traps, Chinese authoritarianism and corruption, environmental damage, and a reliance on Chinese in place of local construction labor, among other problems. [7] Chinese critics of the BRI, however, resent the fact that the government is using Chinese money to subsidize foreign countries and would rather the government spend money on China’s own population. They fear that astronomical loans to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, such as Venezuela, will not be repaid due to economic and political instability in these regions. Netizens play with homophones such as *da sa bi* (大撒币) and *da sha bi* (大傻逼): the first means to throw money around, which has become a synonym for the BRI, and the second means a big idiot. One of Xi’s critics, Ren Zhiqiang, a real estate tycoon in

China, described the Chinese president as “A Clown Who Stripped Himself and Insisted on Becoming an Emperor.” Ren was sentenced to 18 years in prison on corruption charges on September 22, 2020. The Hawaii-based emigre cartoonist Cheng Tao has also repeatedly ridiculed Xi as an emperor without clothes. [8]

1989–2019

Hong Kong occupies a special place in Lan’s art, because it is an exemplary city where oriental and occidental cultures merge. In 2019, however, the motion to pass an extradition bill pushed the prodemocracy protest in Hong Kong to its climax. 2019 also marked the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen military crackdown. At this political juncture, Lan painted *1989–2019* (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *1989–2019* @ Jiny Lan

A bright yellow umbrella takes center stage and Tiananmen lurks behind it. Yellow umbrellas evoke the fight for democracy in Hong Kong. In the background hovers the Basilica di San Marco in Venice, the native city of Marco Polo, also the Italian city with longstanding economic connections to China. The painting evokes the New Silk Road, because Italy became the first G7 country to join the BRI, resisting pressure from the EU and the US. Before Italy, Hungary was the first European country to sign on to the BRI in 2015, followed by Poland, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Portugal. As of 2019, more than half of the EU’s 28 member states have signed bilateral endorsements of the BRI. [9] China’s country-by-country approach revealed the vulnerability of the European project, subverting a united front and causing disunity in the EU. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas criticized Italy’s

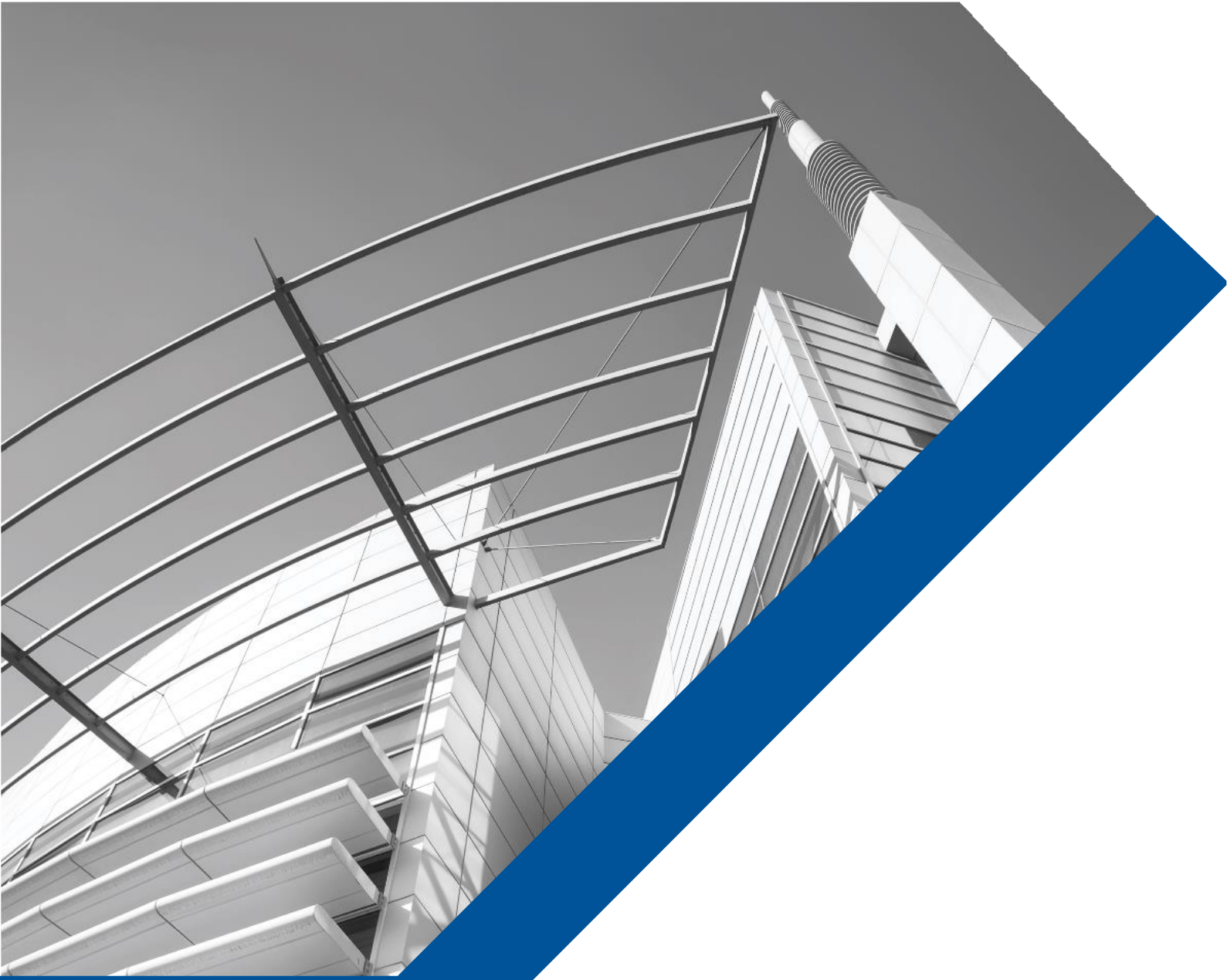
decision to join the BRI and warned that “China is not a liberal democracy.” [10] France also criticized Italy for pursuing a unilateral policy, but France itself signed large contracts during President Xi’s visit to Paris in 2019, and the first trains connecting Wuhan and Lyon ran in April 2016. [11] The two terra-cotta soldiers on the right represent the totalitarian Qin dynasty—the dynasty that first united China but also started a tradition of dictatorial, paternalistic rule.

In conclusion, Jiny Lan’s paintings illustrate the complex relations between China and the EU. In the face of an adverse international climate, the Chinese government may be forced to downscale its investment in the BRI. The country’s low resources of soft power stand in the way of the BRI, and this is the greatest dilemma that China and EU-China relations face.

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