

6.2. The “Dilemma”

Nevertheless, some analysts find a set of geopolitical and security challenges in the ASEAN states with the implementation of China’s BRI. ASEAN is a region full of various geopolitical and security dynamics. It is understood that the ASEAN states are “adept at hedging and diversifying their relations with other powers to ensure that balance of power exists, amid increasing challenges,” and “the geo-economic effects generated by BRI have been translated into geopolitical contentions between China, other major powers, and ASEAN” (Gong, 2018, p. 647). The major powers with strong interests in the region, here, include the United States, Japan, and India. Then, the section will discuss how BRI has been shaping the ASEAN-China security relations.

6.2.1. Geopolitics: Geoeconomic Competition

As previously discussed, the ASEAN states are traditional U.S. allies. The United States has remained as the preeminent player in regional affairs in the region for decades. Just recently, the American regional primacy has been threatened by China’s rise, yet many analysts, especially Western analysts, view that the fundamental features of the American primacy in the region will remain. David Shambaugh (2018) argues that the United States has a “broad and durable set of security ties, diplomatic interactions, and commercial presence across the region” while China has several advantages in in trade, diplomatic influence, and proximity (p. 87). On the other hand, others argue that China’s active engagement has just recently begun, which can imply the possibility of stronger Chinese influence and presence in the coming years.

With the priority in maintaining the regional strategic primacy, it is important for the United States to remain an influential actor in the region. For this, Xue Gong (2018) adds that

“ASEAN member states’ participation in BRI does not preclude them from participating in U.S. security cooperation” (p. 651). She explains that according to the ASEAN (2015), several Southeast Asian states have strengthened their security cooperation with the United States in the past few years. Moreover, even Vietnam, which is a nation that had a ferocious war with the United States in the 1960s, has largely increased its bilateral defense cooperation with the United States (Obama White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

Another top investor in Southeast Asia is Japan with strong industrial interests. In fact, Japan has been implementing its own transnational transportation infrastructure projects since the 1960s through the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Gong, 2018). China’s recent push into infrastructure financing and investment in the ASEAN countries has spurred Japan’s “boldness in infrastructure investment” in the region, leading to several infrastructure investment standoffs between China and Japan in the high-speed railway sector (ibid., p. 648).¹⁸ Interestingly, the Sino-Japanese competition has led the ASEAN countries to “play off the two rivals against each other,” ultimately gaining some leverage in between (ibid, p. 649). The author further describes how China’s BRI has led to a “catalytic effect” on Japan’s infrastructure programs in the region:

In response to China’s BRI, Japan launched its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in 2015, with USD 110 billion pledged for infrastructure development in Asia. In addition, Japan has also pledged to invest USD 200 billion in global infrastructure. The pledge is considered as a direct response to the promotion of China’s BRI throughout Eurasia. Also, the Japan-led ADB increased its lending from USD 26.9 billion in 2015 to USD 31.5 billion in 2016. To compete with China’s regional infrastructure, Japan amended its operating chapter of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) to take further risks and increase support for Japanese companies’ overseas infrastructure businesses (p. 648).

¹⁸ Japan was originally the frontrunner for the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway (HSR) project, but as the Sino-Japanese competition intensifies, Japan had to compromise with a cheaper bilateral loan for its financing (Gong, 2018).

In fact, Japan's attempt to curb the Chinese presence in Southeast Asia is expected to earn positive support from India, who opposes the Sino-Pakistani partnership through BRI. All these dynamics associated with major powers and the BRI-states build up to reveal how there exists a combination of both multipolarity in competitive terms and a multilateral framework consisted of partnerships.

Lastly, India is another player that has been directly affected by China's rapid rise and more proactive approach to international affairs today. With the rapidly rising Chinese economic and military power, India also seeks to promote initiatives that can improve connectivity with the ASEAN states to compete with China in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁹ Moreover, it was found that India plans to build road and inland waterway linking Sittwe in Myanmar with Northeast India, This was understood as a great opportunity for India to increase its connectivity with the ASEAN countries, ultimately accelerating the pan-Asian integration in the future (Bhattacharyay et al., 2012).

6.2.2. Security

The South China Sea case has hindered the progress of the BRI maritime projects (Gong, 2018). Some analysts view that the BRI maritime cooperation may be a tool for China to strengthen its presence and influence in the highly disputed South China Sea (Palit, 2017). Although Vietnam has been supporting the BRI projects, the nation is also cautious about the security and geopolitical implications due to the historical distrust and unresolved South China Sea issues (Gong, 2018). Meanwhile, although Indonesia does not have issues with the sovereignty of the South China Sea,

¹⁹ These connectivity projects include the Asian Highway Network sponsored by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and the ongoing India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway (IMTTH) that will run through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

it remains wary of China's economic and political influences, ultimately slowing down the progress of the BRI maritime projects.²⁰

Followed by its rapid economic growth, China has stepped up territorial and maritime claims over the South China Sea. According to Nicola Casarini (2018), "These claims are not only based on economic and security considerations, but also on national identity and the renewal of China's past glories", which is linked to President Xi's vision of a Chinese dream (p. 26).²¹ This is understood to bring a "glaring division between China and the West when it comes to the application of international law to sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea" (ibid., 2018, p. 27). The United States has remained an important actor in the region's security affairs through bilateral and multilateral frameworks to "restrain China's ambition to challenge the current regional order" (Gong, 2018, p. 650).²² The South China Sea sovereignty issue is associated with the U.S.-China tug-of-war over influence in Southeast Asia. As China continues to challenge the existing regional order and the rules-based system in the South China Sea, the ASEAN countries inevitably have to be cautious in fully embracing the BRI projects. These security matters which are tightly linked to the issue of regional governance reveal that there may be a potential multipolarity in the region. Therefore, combining the dynamics of the economic symbiosis discussed in Section 7.1 and the "dilemma" in the present section (Section 7.2), it can be understood that the region reveals a synthesis of both multilateralism and multipolarity, especially

²⁰ This is evident in the incidents near the Natuna Islands. For more details, refer to Herlijanto (2017).

²¹ "Xi's closing speech at the 2018 National People's Congress chimed with an increasingly assertive foreign policy, in particular when he cited China's island-building campaign in the South China Sea as one of the key accomplishments of his Presidency. This implicitly linked his vision of a Chinese dream and the rejuvenation of the country with the idea of restoring the glory of the ancient times when China presided over a Sino-centric order in East Asia" (Casarini, 2018, p. 2).

²² "For example, the ASEAN-U.S. Plan of Action (2016-2020) enables the United States to deepen bilateral and multilateral diplomatic and security engagement through many ASEAN-led mechanisms. Examples include the ASEAN-U.S. Summit, the ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue, and the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) Meeting, ARF, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, and the EAS" (Gong, 2018, p. 650).

with respect to security-related dynamics. This also indicates that within the same regions or countries, different issue-related orders are likely to emerge simultaneously.

7. Central Asia

Central Asia is regarded as a critical region for China's BRI program as it is included in the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridors.²³ As such, BRI has the potential to drastically change the economic and political dynamics of Central Asia (Chance, 2016). From China's perspective, there are three important variables at play that explain the importance of Central Asia to the success of BRI. First, Central Asia was an essential transit for the ancient Silk Road due to its geostrategic location connecting East Asia and Eurasia (Hoh, 2019). Second, the five countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – are very rich in natural resources, including uranium, gas, and oil, which are “essential to China's large energy demands” (ibid., 2019, p. 244). Third, Central Asia is the main land corridor of BRI, thus the region is a critical transportation hub and a bridge to other lucrative markets, such as West Asia, the Gulf Region, Russia, and Europe.

The five Central Asian countries also expect to benefit from BRI for several important reasons. As Avinoam Idan points out, “the major geographic characteristic of the Central Asian countries established following the breakup of the Soviet Union is the fact that they are landlocked”. This entails many difficulties for them in such spheres as foreign policy, security, human development, and economics (2018, p. 1).²⁴ Lacking connectivity and access to global

²³ Further information on the BRI economic corridors, see Ramasamy et al. (2017), Trade and trade facilitation along the Belt and Road Initiative corridors.

²⁴ Idan (2018) states that “the average GDP of these landlocked countries reaches only 57 percent of that of their maritime neighbors” (p. 1).

markets, Central Asia has been struggling in its trade and economic growth compared to their maritime neighbors. However, with the enhanced connectivity and improved infrastructure relished from the BRI projects, Central Asia can increase its trade and economic activities through effective transportation system and access to the sea. Therefore, it is a plausible claim that China and Central Asia have fairly complementary aims and expected benefits, especially economic ones.

Nevertheless, some analysts claim that while the medieval silk routes in which “the vast Central Asian region together with Xinjiang formed the key nodes,” the new Silk Road Economic Belt is “decidedly Sino-centric” given that its central objective lies in creating incentives and outlets for the less-developed Xinjiang as gateway for new trade channels to global markets (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, due to its historical ties to it, Russia is still an important actor in the region, and thus can view BRI as “confirmation of an emerging rivalry with China in the post-Soviet space” (Peyrouse, 2017, p. 96).

7.1. Complementarities

As of today, many Central Asian states have officially welcomed the implementation of BRI (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018). “The prospects of transport connectivity, greater opportunities for trade and earning transit fees as well as development and export of their natural resources are very attractive to all states in the region” (ibid., p. 3). It is understood that China’s aspiration to increase land connectivity to Europe and access to global markets heavily depend on its ability to succeed in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan, which is the ninth largest country in the region encompassing the enormous Eurasian expanses. Not to mention its geopolitical importance, Kazakhstan is also an important supplier of energy resources to China (Tengri News, 2013).

The Chinese economic model with the motto of stability and “development for all” (or “win-win”) makes it very attractive for the Central Asian local elites (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018, p. 4). The authors explain this Chinese model in detail:

China has established a reputation and niche in financing and building massive infrastructural development projects at a rapid pace and a low cost, particularly in Africa, and engaging in the same in Central Asia, South and South East Asia, Latin America, and Europe. It has not shied away from investing in regions seen as too unstable and presenting investment risks, signified by its welcome by the 65 countries (as of October 2017) participating in the BRI. With Western investors being wary of investing in Central Asian states which lack governance capacity and effective rule of law (Kazakhstan being an exception) and Russia prioritizing military and security-linked aid, China has been providing financial and technical assistance, refurbishing old links and initiating new projects in the region filling in the “\$8 trillion infrastructural funding gap” (p. 6).

Moreover, the BRI investments in Kyrgyzstan’s electricity supply grid and power lines have greatly contributed to connecting the nation’s northern and southern regions separated by mountains. The direct energy links made possible by BRI allow Kyrgyzstan to save \$8-9 million annually in transit fees (ibid, 2018, p. 10). Of course, not all China-proposed BRI projects have been realized, but there definitely are tangible outcomes and benefits. While it is true that China did not simply step in to be *altruistic*, there exist complementary aims and gains between the two parties, generating a cooperative multilateral framework of the Chinese “development for all” (“win-win”) model as envisioned in President Xi’s principle of *peaceful coexistence*. Nevertheless, China is expected to increase its influence in the region, though not without facing certain geopolitical restraints.

7.2. Geopolitical Restraints

While BRI can be perceived as an attractive undertaking for Central Asian republics considering the economic gains and benefits from huge Chinese investments, the initiative will certainly affect the region in many other ways, including its geopolitics and culture.

Fabio Indeo (2018) explains that from a Chinese perspective, BRI geopolitical projects aim to achieve two strategic goals:

The implementation of an alternative continental route for trade and energy imports to reduce the dependence on maritime routes crossing Malacca and the South China Sea; and the enhancement of a security buffer zone between Xinjiang western province and Central Asia to preserve China's western provinces from instability and threats linked to Islamist terrorism (p. 136).

Central Asia has a strategic significance to the BRI because it is crossed by two of the six main BRI economic corridors (China-Central Asia-West Asia and the Eurasian land bridge). For this reason, it will have an impact on the region's economic development and geopolitical patterns. In this capacity, China is expected to strengthen its geopolitical position in Central Asia, especially in the areas heavily impacted by BRI. However, it is not the only great power in the region.

Analysts claim that Russia continues to keep a close eye on Central Asia, which it lost control of following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that it aspires to expand its influence once again. (Yellinek, 2020).²⁵ Indeed, as Michael Cox observes, "amongst a very large number of experts the view has been – and in many respects remains – that there will always be much more that divides Moscow and Beijing than unites them" (2016, p. 317).

Indeed, China has become the main economic power in the region with trade volumes increased from \$1.8 billion in 2000 to \$34 billion in 2015, while the five Central Asian republics'

²⁵ "One of its [Russia's] tools of influence in the region is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), established in 2015 which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia" (Yellinek, 2020, p. 6).

trade with Russia amounted to only \$23 billion (Peyrouse, 2017). As the Chinese influence threatens the regional order of which Russia had originally been a dominant player, the geopolitical scenario is changing in the region. Indeo (2018) claims that “even if Beijing denies having political ambitions and highlights that BRI is only a global economic project, it is clear that Chinese involvement in the region will erode and marginalize Russia’s presence” (p. 138).

However, Cox aptly points out that the reality on the ground contradicts this popular perspective, as China and Russia have of recent enhanced their strategic partnership. An important factor in this regard has been the mutual threat they both face from the United States and its allies.

In sum,

The scene is thus set for a continued standoff, one consequence of which will be to reinforce the belief in Moscow and Beijing that, in a hostile international environment, one should stick close to one’s friends (however imperfect they may be) because in an insecure world such friends (warts and all) are central to achieving what both Russia and China are still striving to achieve: namely, greater political security at home, fewer obstacles to their ambitions in their own neighbourhood and a more equal world system in which the United States and its allies have less control over what happens. So long as they continue to share these basic goals – and there is no reason to think this is going to change any time soon – there is every chance the two will continue to travel together along the same, sometimes rocky, path they have been moving along since the beginning of the 21st century (p. 330).

In short, China and Russia are not the only actors with interests in the region: The United States has an interest in Central Asia, not only because of the region’s critical trade routes and rich natural resources, but also because it sees both China and Russia as obstacles to its global hegemonic ambitions. In this sense, Central Asia is a focal point in the geopolitical competition between the three powers of regional influence. I will return to the variable of the United States subsequently.

Here, it is worth stressing that economic cooperation between China and Russia has been improving significantly since 1991. For instance, the volume of the trade between the two countries has increased from \$5 billion to \$110 billion in 2019, though the volume declined due to the pandemic. The volume of trade between them is expected to increase significantly in the near future. More to the point, based on extensive research, Feng Yujun et al. (2019) note that “Moscow’s main objective in its relations with China is to use the BRI and other Chinese-originated projects to help develop Russia’s economy, without at the same time inviting Beijing to exercise undue influence on Moscow’s policies. So far, the Russians have concluded that the BRI offers them some opportunities, and the risks involved are manageable.” Nevertheless, the current and projected trends indicate that this managed relationship will remain asymmetric, favoring China’s growing influence in Central Asia.

8. Africa

Africa is a region where infrastructure financing and economic development are often prioritized over political concerns. BRI is critical to African countries in fostering economic development through large infrastructure projects to fill their infrastructure gap and help build a bridge to the global market. For China, on the other hand, Africa is a crucial region as the maritime road connects China and Europe by passing through Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. Many East African countries, most notably Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania, are an important part of BRI due to “Djibouti’s ports, Ethiopia’s rapidly expanding manufacturing capacity, and the region’s existing plans to connect rail, and energy networks” (Mukwaya and Mold, 2018). Also, China is attracted to Africa’s rich resources to fuel its gigantic

economy. While these factors point to what China often refers to as a “win-win cooperation,” there also exist certain factors that suggest otherwise, such as fear of exploitation associated with geopolitics in the region, which will be discussed in Section 8.2.

In short, China’s presence has grown both rapidly and enormously across the African continent, and understanding the various dynamics in the region would enhance the paper’s clarity in settling down the debate of CCD vs. SCO. This section will mainly focus on the economic variable of the African countries as their needs for economic development are prioritized.

8.1. Development Partnership: Peaceful Coexistence

China’s approach to “development partnership” is trade than aid, and this is understood to be perfectly fitting the BRI’s objective (Breuer, 2017, p. 2). Such approach is based on principles of peaceful coexistence, including “inter alia mutual respect for sovereignty, equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference into the inner affairs of the other state” (ibid., p. 1). BRI seeks to build a cooperative platform for cooperation in trade, finance, society, and culture. China’s investments in Africa have significantly risen since 2000, with total spending of the Chinese government and businesses reaching USD 6 billion in 2014 (Mukwaya, 2018). Then, at the 2018 China-Africa Cooperation Forum, China announced it would be investing \$60 billion in financial support to Africa. The need for increased investment in infrastructure in Africa is clear. Many empirical studies have shown that infrastructure will have a positive effect on growth and trade in Africa (Estache et al., 2005; Boopen, 2006).

Kenya, Djibouti, and Egypt play a pivotal role in China’s BRI in Africa. As Egypt has a strategic advantage with the Suez Canal, it was the first country to sign the BRI mutual agreement with China, and in 2016, both countries signed a currency-swap deal (KOTRA, 2018). Djibouti is

another critical point for the success of the initiative as it is a stopover for 30% of Africa’s maritime transport passing through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to reach Egypt and East Africa. Kenya shares its borders with the South Sudan which exports oil to China, and China sees Kenya as a safe channel to import oil supplies as the Sudan-South Sudan conflict does not seem to make progress. More specifically, the Mombasa Port in Kenya is understood to be the core point of BRI in Africa as it connects China with Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Egypt and opens up a gateway toward the Mediterranean (ibid., 2018).

Table 1. Main BRI Projects in Africa (Unit: 1 billion)

Country	Project	Investment	Progress
	Maritime railways	12	Completed in 2018
Nigeria	Expanding the Dangote Cement	4.34	
Republic of South Africa	Modderfontein New City Project	7	Expected to be completed in 2030
Malawi	Infrastructure development	1.7	In progress
Mozambique	Mphanda Nkuwa Dam, hydroelectric power plant	3.1	In progress
Republic of the Congo	Packaged programs	6	In progress
Sudan	Khartoum Railways, Port Sudan	1.3	Completed in 2012
Egypt	New town construction	45	In progress
	Metro system	0.74	
Djibouti	Free Trade Area	3.5	In progress
	Metro system	4	In progress
	Lappset Project	13.1	Under planning
Kenya	Standard gauge railways	7	Partially completed; in progress
Tanzania	Port Bagamoyo	7	In progress

Source: KOTRA (2018)

Moreover, as Table 5 shows, China’s exports to Africa have increased to a large extent after the implementation of the BRI projects in the region. The Chinese exports to Africa increased from \$84.6 billion in 2012, which was before the BRI projects were fully embraced in the region, to \$94.1 billion in 2017 (KOTRA, 2018). In just five years, the Chinese exports increased by

approximately 11%, where Egypt, Kenya, and Djibouti, the major BRI countries in the region, had experienced the greatest rate of increase (16%, 81%, and 75%, respectively) (ibid., 2018).

Table 2. China Exports to Africa (Unit: 1 million, %)

	Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	% Change
	Total Exports	2,050,109	2,210,662	2,343,222	2,280,541	2,135,308	2,279,162	11.17
	Total Exports to Africa	84,626	91,843	105,049	107,378	93,925	94,108	11.20
1	Republic of South Africa	15,334	16,833	15,705	15,880	13,029	14,971	-2.37
2	Nigeria	9,308	12,045	15,449	13,648	10,259	12,263	31.75
3	Egypt	8,225	8,353	10,460	11,963	10,776	9,535	15.93
4	Algeria	5,418	6,015	7,390	7,600	7,802	6,790	25.32
5	Kenya	2,789	3,222	4,932	5,918	5,758	5,057	81.32
6	Ghana	4,790	3,946	4,155	5,313	4,872	4,883	1.94
7	Morocco	3,130	3,270	2,966	2,901	3,164	3,193	2.01
8	Tanzania	2,091	3,140	3,891	4,287	3,714	3,145	50.41
9	Ethiopia	1,530	1,867	2,920	3,445	3,255	2,671	74.58
10	Angola	4,044	3,965	5,976	3,722	1,761	2,297	-43.2
11	Sudan	2,180	2,396	1,929	2,399	2,234	2,229	2.25
12	Djibouti	902	1,020	1,129	1,983	2,249	2,200	143.9
13	Liberia	3,480	2,336	1,709	1,357	1,594	2,102	-39.6
14	Senegal	795	988	1,651	2,194	2,270	2,052	158.11
15	Benin	2,414	2,991	3,493	2,993	2,088	1,936	-19.8

Source: Global Trade Atlas

According to Venkateswaran (2020), the trade volume between China and Africa has surged drastically from \$1 billion USD in 1980 to \$128 billion USD in 2016 (p. 1). Also, the amount of Chinese loans to Africa since 2000 is \$143 billion USD, with half of them given over the last four years alone, which ultimately made China Africa's largest bilateral creditor.²⁶

BRI in Africa is often criticized for its "debt trap diplomacy". However, a recent estimate by the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) found that the Chinese loans are not a major contributor to debt distress in Africa, identifying only 6 countries where China, among other

²⁶ Johns Hopkins SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative Database

financial sources, has been contributing the heaviest lending.²⁷ In fact, another study by AidData found that there are positive economic spillovers of Chinese investment that produced a more equal distribution of economic activity. Bluhm et al. (2018) explains this in more detail:

Chinese development financing directly affects subnational and national development in Africa, but how this relates to the spatial distribution of economic activity is not clear ex ante. Greater local growth could lead to a reduction of spatial inequalities within regions – both directly and indirectly through positive spillovers – or it could increase the within-region concentration of economic activity at the expense of poorer cities and villages in the region (p. 22).

While it is true that there are concerns about BRI's impact on Africa and its economic stability, its overall economic impact on the region has been positive, at least in relative terms.

8.2. Geopolitics and Geoeconomics

While the economic aspects have made a relatively smooth progress, there exist some challenges of geopolitics. Raphael ZiroMwatela and Zhao Changfeng (2016) put them in a very clear manner:

The horn of African region and the Suez Canal has been traditionally a Western-controlled zone with the US and her allies being the primary guarantor for maritime security. Whichever powerful state controls the security of that region, also controls the maritime trade routes between Asia, Europe and Africa. Egypt and Djibouti, two of the three African states part of the OBOR [BRI] are strategically located at the heart of global geo-politics playground (p. 11).

Djibouti is a unique case as it now hosts military bases for the United States, France, and now, none other than, China. China's involvement in Djibouti could potentially realign security partnerships that have underpinned the international order since 1945 (ibid., p. 12). Meanwhile, in

²⁷ For details, see Janet Eom, Deborah Brautigam, and Lina Benabdallah, *The Path Ahead: The 7th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation*, China Africa Research Initiative, August 1.

Egypt, China views the country's strategic geopolitical location at the Suez Canal as an indispensable opportunity, and this explains why Egypt is the only African nation to have officially signed bilateral BRI agreements with China. On the other hand, the inclusion of Djibouti has been "a result of logical assumptions than from official pronouncements" that can be explained under the quest for global dominance and the geopolitics of the horn of Africa as stated earlier" (ibid., p. 13). As 30% of the world shipping pass through the entrance of the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean and onto the Suez Canal, Djibouti and Egypt are critical (ibid., 2016).

Based on such geopolitical aims of BRI, some analysts find that the Chinese infrastructure projects create new geoeconomics connectivity through the economic corridors across the many regions that have been rendered "simply geo-politicized" or even "insignificant (Africa)" through geoeconomics interventions, calling them '*intervention with Chinese characteristics*' (Forough, 2019, p. 275). Cai (2018) also argue that China has tried to establish new institutions of its own, such as the AIIB or BRI, outside the existing international system to "bypass the USA-dominated existing system" and ultimately to increase China's influence in the regional and global economic arena (p. 839). In the context of the challenging the present regional and global system and conditions, analysts claim that BRI can be understood as its grand strategy to increase economic power and expand wealth as a leverage (ibid., 2018).

While China's geopolitical aims can lead to exploitation in the African continent, China was the first to recognize Zambia's independence, and while the West appears as a "colonialist," China can be perceived as *relatively* less "imperialistic" and more "altruistic" with its shared colonial history. Also, China's offer does not demand political change. Most importantly, China's presence is definitely needed in Africa for the purposes of economic development, expanding the region's connectivity with the global market, and ultimately reducing poverty. While "China's

hostile economic practices, military expansion, and coercive political and ideological tactics in Africa should not be ignored,”²⁸ BRI engagement is *essential* to foster development and growth in the region (Risberg, 2019, p. 45). BRI can provide an alternative and *better* leverage to the weak African economies, in relative terms, and eventually generate a multilateral community.

9. U.S. Countermeasures to BRI

As discussed in Section 2.1, the rise of China is related to the future of American hegemony. The present global order which is predominated by the United States and its allies has been subject to potential alterations in the global governance. In this sense, BRI has geopolitical implications, and is associated with the important issue of Sino-American rivalry. The foregoing examination of BRI demonstrates China’s growing influence in many of the areas impacted by the initiative, which is seen as coming at the expense of American influence, though this varies from region to region.

While some analysts consider the threat of the BRI to American interests as exaggerated, some advocate for a U.S. response to counter a rising hegemonic power (Risberg, 2019; Marston, 2018). In fact, Pearl Risberg (2019) argues that “the slow burning economic implications of the BRI are not necessarily a threat to U.S. prosperity, nor to global development” (p. 1). However, as we are about to see, last three American administrations have signaled that they see the rise of China as a threat.

²⁸ For further information, see Risberg, *The Give-And-Take of BRI In Africa*, CSIS New Perspectives, 2019.

Beijing for Indo-Pacific influence” (Miki, 2021). President Biden said this 2-trillion-plus joint infrastructure plan will “boost America’s innovative edge in markets where global leadership is up for grabs and in the competition with China in particular” (ibid.).³¹

This plan dovetails Japan’s ongoing attempt to build a robust challenge to BRI. Japan’s post-war approach as articulated in the flying geese model of development has been pursued by China in its endeavor through BRI.³² Although Japan’s *lost decades* and China’s rise let many analysts to “overlook Japan’s role in Southeast and South Asia”, Japan remains as a critical source of development assistance in Asia (ibid.). In fact, the Abe administration’s approach to infrastructure investment as part of his *Abenomics* program was the “quality infrastructure” program. This quality investment means “considering a wide range of factors when making investment decisions, including environmental and social impact, debt sustainability, the safety and reliability of the construction, and the impact on local employment and technical expertise” (ibid.).

Although the future remains unpredictable, this Japanese initiative, which entails formidable cooperation with the United States, can surely slow down the progress of China’s BRI. To say the least, it is likely to make the region less Sino-centric than it would otherwise be.

³¹ The infrastructure plan led by the United States and Japan will focus on tackling climate change, promoting next-generation battery technology and hydrogen power, and working on telecommunications technology – “including 5G, which has become a battlefield in the fight for tech dominance between the U.S. and China” (Miki, 2021).

³² For details on the flying geese model, refer to UNCTAD (2013), *The Asian Developmental State And the Flying Geese Paradigm*. Available at https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgdp20133_en.pdf .

10. Conclusion

Although President Xi proposed that BRI would restore the peaceful trade between the East and the West by reviving the old Silk Road spirit, some have expressed fears in China's pursuit, believing that the initiative is the nation's own business model which optimizes China's interests and that it has been applied to various BRI businesses. In some countries, the issue of BRI debt-trap was seriously raised, and analysts today are concerned that the BRI program may harm the long-term stability of the relatively small BRI-economies. Nevertheless, this study has found that the initiative certainly creates complementary benefits for both China and the recipient countries in economic aspects, despite the challenges in the contexts of geopolitics, history, and security.

Consequently, BRI has already helped China become the key economic, and political partner of nations in its backyard and beyond to a considerable extent and will likely continue to do so in the future. Relatedly, the initiative has allowed China to bind the neighboring nations more closely to itself than before, increasing the nation's global position. With the pertinent financial and other formal institutions it has spearheaded, coupled with the massive infrastructure it is building, China is also creating a Sino-centric order within the sphere of BRI.

Although this order resembles the one the United States has built and rebuilt after World War II globally, it does not require the latter's neoliberal-economic conditionalities or "good governance" from its partners. This makes the China-anchored order more attractive to many rulers in the BRI-region. However, the limitations discussed throughout this research will likely prevent China from establishing more than "half-hegemony" within this order, and perhaps even less in the BRI areas that have been able to maintain close relationship with the United States and its

allies, such as Japan. By the same token, this means that BRI has helped China increase its influence, in some measure at the expense of that of the United States.

While the competition between China and the United States for influence in Asia certainly comes with certain complications, the stability and prosperity of the BRI-economies are in line with the interests of both China and the United States. In this sense, it is critical for the powerful international actors, such as China and the United States, to find a common ground which can ultimately provide assurance and *win-win* outcomes for all. In other words, the long-term success of China's slogans of "community of common destiny" and "win-win partnership" can benefit from the creation of such a ground.

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