An Unprecedented Ascendancy: China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Prospect of a New Era for International Relations

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Abstract

This paper will explore the significance and unprecedented nature of the Belt and Road in International Relations terms, as well as the ways in which China's assertion of global power via the Belt and Road challenges conventional norms and practice in world politics. A distinct and valuable dimension will be contributed to the wider sphere of relevant literature by not only identifying and assessing the significance of regional/global implications wrought by China's ascendancy, but also critiquing the analytical tools that are deployed for this purpose. This will be achieved by outlining the ways in which conventions of orthodox International Relations have shaped perceptions of this ongoing power shift and the range of responses to it. While a focus on various aspects of China's ascendancy and global engagement will be utilised to draw conclusions of value for the broader issues at hand, it is specifically the Belt and Road Initiative - China's flagship global development agenda which represents the culmination of its foreign policy strategy - that will serve as the focal theme and point of reference for this analysis. The findings of this paper and their repercussions shall be laid out in the context of prevailing Western-led global norms and Westphalian constructions of world society.

"China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will move the world."

Napoleon Bonaparte.

Chapter I: Introduction, Overview, and Rationale

The political, financial, and civilisational rise of China has come to encapsulate one of the 21st Century's most wide-ranging and pivotal issues for modern international relations. Significant, complex, and wide-reaching implications are presented to analysts not only in terms of tangible repercussions for global security and geopolitics, but also for the very ways in which International Relations (IR) are conducted and conceptualised. Literature dedicated to analysing China's ascendancy has tended to utilise established understandings of international actors, norms, institutions, and principles as part of a comprehensive explanatory framework.

However, the bold pace of China's rise and the ways in which this ascendancy is being expressed in innovative and wide-reaching ways stimulates a range of challenges against these understandings, to an extent which is arguably unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. This paper is guided by the premise that China's ongoing and progressive evolution from regional hegemon to global superpower represents the most significant challenge to the durability of a Westphalian global structure, in which the 'US-led liberal order' has reigned supreme since the end of the Second World War, and by extension the continued applicability of conventional International Relations building-blocks established within this paradigm. At the forefront of these developments is China's Belt and Road Initiative, a multi trillion-dollar developmental endeavour that is as epic in its potential for transformative political repercussions as it is in economic ambition. Drawing on the deep-rooted symbolism of the ancient Silk Road trading route in Chinese historical narrative, the Belt and Road has quickly come to represent a broad header encompassing almost all aspects of future Chinese engagement abroad. While China has for some time now set forth a range of initiatives, activities, and institutions for the purposes of defining the trajectory of its own future, the Belt and Road Initiative represents the most significant future determinant of not only China's place in the world, but reciprocally "of the *world's future* as it negotiates the anticipated rise of China to growing levels of wealth and power" (Macaes 2018, p. 22 emphasis added).

The Belt and Road Initiative - An Overview

Although widely considered to be the culmination of China's 'Going Out' strategy, the Belt and Road has been variably described as a state-backed plan for global dominance via the establishment of alternate institutions (Carrai 2018), a stimulus package for the declining national economy (Pantucci and Lain 2017), and an overly ambitious and superfluous gambit that will never be realised on the scale that it is imagined (Babones 2017). Others have even simply dismissed the Belt and Road as an elaborate marketing campaign for widespread activity that has already long been in process - i.e. Chinese

investment sound the world (Lopacinska 2017). With such wildly divergent views across the spectrum of International Relations and policymaking, it is clear that the Belt and Road is posing questions that are complex in nature, with no clear trajectory or definitive precedent to provide obvious answers.

Formerly referred to as the equally somewhat unassuming 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative by President Xi Jinping served to effectively set out "the direction of future Chinese international leadership" (Macaes 2018). The 'Silk Road Economic Belt' is fundamentally connective and integrative in nature, consisting of "a network of overland routes and railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, arid power grids", with the broad aim of linking China together with Central Asia, Russia and Europe (Macaes 2018, p. 10). The 'Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road' consists of coastal infrastructure and networked ports aimed in two directions - through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean towards Europe, and through the South China Sea towards the South Pacific (Macaes 2018). To date, 152 nations have in some shape or form been tangibly associated with China via the Belt and Road, with state elites across the developed and developing world increasingly having to consider their own future and place in the world from worldviews which are increasingly tied to China's expansion. However, it currently remains unclear as to what ways this 'partnering' will manifest in practical terms. The Belt and Road ultimately represents the pinnacle strategic initiative of China's global policy, with immense backing in both financial and political terms, to the extent that Beijing has essentially fated the Belt and Road to be 'too big to fail' (Babones 2017, p. 8). The extent of the Belt and Road's ambition and backing is unsurprising when understood as the "concrete manifestation of previous visions such as 'harmonious world' and 'peaceful development', as well as of Xi's 'Chinese dream' of rejuvenation from national humiliation." (Macaes 2018, pp. 28, 31).

As a result, the Belt and Road has generated a considerable amount of pontification and analysis with regards to China's place in the world and how the world in turn fits into the realms and imagination of China's ascendancy. The Belt and Road has somewhat inevitably drawn comparisons with the US government's Marshall Plan, initiated in 1948 to assist Western Europe in rebuilding and modernising after the Second World War, with the political aim of quelling the spread of Communism and maintaining a degree of ideological homogeneity. However, although there are parallels which can be drawn between the Belt and Road and the Marshall Plan in terms of the congruity between developmental activity and geopolitical objectives, the scope of the Belt and Road goes considerably beyond anything envisioned in the Marshall Plan. The modern-day equivalent of $100 billion USD that was spent by the US government pales in comparison to the 14 trillion USD that the Chinese Communist Party has budgeted for the Belt and Road (Feng and Liang 2018, pp. 1.21 -122). Also, the Belt and Road's focus is explicitly *global* (as opposed to regional) in potential and ambition, with Beijing making clear that the Belt and Road is open to all despite its disproportionate focus on the Eurasian landmass. In line with this, the 'cooperation' that the initiative is communicatively premised on has been expressed in fundamentally 'win-win' terms. It is also important to distinguish that while the US was the dominant global power at the time of the Marshall Plan, China is currently on the ascendancy, seeking to impose itself

against the hegemony of US superpower. As will be explained throughout this paper, this has potential implications for International Relations and world order of substantial significance. All of this has necessitated an increasingly critical focus on the nature of China's political system, as well as the divergence of many features of Chinese governance from liberal values and the ways in which this worldview may be exported or emboldened across the world.

A number of scholars have criticised the conjoining of the Belt and Road's economic appeal and political objectives as amounting to a form of 'infrastructural-led colonialism' and 'debt-trap development'. These perspectives explicitly focus on the geopolitical objectives that China seeks to achieve through the co-opting of states which are geoeconomically subservient. Others have taken a more sanguine approach to understanding the Belt and Road, espousing the benefits and necessity of economic, technological, and political integration to sustain the next chapter of globalisation, particularly across an increasingly integrated 'Eurasian supercontinent'. These views reflect and follow on from a considerable amount of analysis relating to China's long-standing involvement in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa. These perspectives tend to interpret Chinese engagement in apolitical terms while emphasising economic advancement and infrastructural development ahead of any potential geopolitical ramifications (see for example Dent 2010). The Belt and Road evidently represents a complex formulation that necessitates an analysis of the wider systems and structures within which it is situated and imagined.

Rationale

It is pertinent at this stage to assess why the questions and issues associated with China's global ascendancy are exceptional and particularly worthy of analysis. Indeed, modern history has fluctuated between periods of multipolarity, bipolarity and unipolarity, all of which have reflected the rise and fall of various powerful states, with reduced standing in the international sphere usually following domestic stagnation and instability, and vice versa (Hart 1976). Why does China's Belt and Road Initiative represent anything particularly novel in the sphere of International Relations? To answer this, it is essential to note that what *has* remained constant since the end of the Second World War is the Westphalian system of global order and the dominance of the liberal international economic order, also referred to as the US-led liberal international order or rules-based order. As a non-Western state with a long and distinct history of viewing the world's structure and order in relation to itself, China symbolically and tangibly challenges the orthodoxy of systems, institutions, and norms which derive from predominantly Westphalian-based modes of thinking and practice. This is most poignant in relation to ideals and principles of state-state interactions, state sovereignty, individual rights, global governance and international development.

China's rise is particularly interesting for practitioners and students of International Relations for the ways in which it encompasses complex questions set in the backdrop of both global and regional contexts. Its rivalry with the world's lone superpower, the United States, is rife with paradox and uncertainties. Both states must navigate the dilemma of a power-rivalry in which both actors view each other as an existential threat

to their own growth and dominance and simultaneously as an economic entity with which their own economic interests are inextricably intertwined (Yan 2010. pp. 263-270). The fact that the United States has long assumed the mantle of leadership for this international order makes the rise of China even more noteworthy when contrasted with what is perceived to be a global retreat of the United States under the relatively isolationist leadership of President Trump (Stokes 2018, pp. 133-150). Regionally, China's growing assertion in the Asia Pacific is increasingly contrasted with the receding presence, influence and leverage of the United States, with East Asian states increasingly prioritising policy and engagement based on Chinese priorities as opposed to the regional interests of the United States.

Although these developments and issues are fundamentally concerned with matters of international power in the general sense, it is of crucial significance to understand China's ascendancy in the context of its status as a *civilisational state*, with a distinctive perception of domestic and global governance (Jacques 2012). This presents obvious and wide-ranging implications for the institutions and norms which have come to underpin the liberal order. Scholars have long argued that institutions and norms of international relations reflect the dominion of Western civilisation, given the predominant role played by Western states and empires in their conception and global permeation (Acharya 2014). Indeed, the normalisation and proliferation of the nation state concept itself, the central actor around which conventional international relations are constructed, transpired in ways that were inherently tied to the rise of European influence. While most of Europe was functioning in a system of Westphalia as early as the 17th century, its globalised proliferation beyond the Western world was facilitated by the advent of European colonialism. The potential for colonial subservience to provide a means of effectively spreading and normalising global ideas perhaps explains why the previously discussed depiction of the Belt and Road as a form of 'infrastructural colonialism' has garnered much attention and critique.

As will be later discussed later in more substantial detail, the Westphalian system of global order is centred around particular conceptions of state-state, state-society, and state-individual relations. This has facilitated and emboldened particular ideas about the world's functioning, such as those espoused in democratic peace theory. This theory, which posits that democratic states are hesitant to engage in armed conflict with other recognised democracies, has played a dominant role in global political discourse. The theory has not only guided international development strategies (Collier and Rohner 2008), but has also exerted a formative influence over the functioning of post-war International Relations. Partially justifying intervention and overthrowing ruling governments based on their anti-democraticness is perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of the extent to which the pursuit of global democratisation has had far-reaching implications for world politics (see Russett 2005 and Weede 2004 for comprehensive discussions on this). Liberal democracy and democratic governance, or rather the lack thereof, have also served as key barometers by which 'rogue states', such as Iran and North Korea, are identified and constructed as problems (Saunders 2009). In contrast, the civilisational state that China represents (Jacques 2012) is an inherently 'illiberal projection', as it challenges the conception and legitimacy of common democratic standards, universal values, and human rights, in favour of principles and

governance that are particular to the civilisation in question (Kagarlitsy 2014). This is especially noteworthy given the propensity for certain states who are engaged in the Belt and Road to favour this ideological stance, as in the case of Turkey and the ruling party's pursuit of Ottoman revivalism (Ongur 2014). The growth of populist parties in nations as diverse as Hungary, Brazil, and India has been interpreted as being symptomatic of liberalism's global decline and weakened appeal, suggesting that there is potential for alternative worldviews to take precedence in both domestic and global governance. Recent unrest in Hong Kong and an escalation of suppression in Xinjiang represent only the culmination of long-standing friction between the Chinese state and peoples within its peripheries, and it is crucial to assess how developing countries (particularly those with autocratic leanings and those with fractious demographics) are likely to respond to economic opportunities and courting from a state demonstrating a notably alternate path to development and governance, alongside diverging notions of rights, liberties, and state-society relations.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that this same international system has remained flexible enough to accommodate China's system of governance and distinctive path to development, enabling it the means to radically alleviate poverty on an unprecedented scale. The ruling party has long been aware that its legitimacy is fundamentally predicated on its capacity to effectively improve the lives of its citizenry in material terms (Nordin and Weissmann 2018). Until recently, China's rise was framed in predominantly economic contexts - an inevitable consequence of the rapid and sustained growth of its economy, with its overtaking of the US as the world 's largest economy by nominal GDP forecast as an impending inevitability. However, it is the political leverage afforded by that economic power, in conjunction with the quagmire of entangled alliances and rivalries that are catalysed as a result of China's growing ambition, presence, and influence overseas, that require in-depth scrutiny and analysis for the purposes of better understanding the implications for global order.

The Belt and Road has accentuated the significance of developments which have been used to discern the trajectory and nature of China's growing leadership in international affairs and global governance. These include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and various legal and political entanglements relating to the South China Sea. These and the Belt and Road Initiative are all noted for their capacity to both alter and be altered by the international landscape of geopolitics and geoeconomics in "ways which can be hard to pin down" (Garlick 2016, p. 285). As such, there are inherent difficulties when seeking to account empirically for the "tangled complexity of China's rise in a way which meshes with one or more of the theoretical frameworks of academic International Relations" (Garlick 2016, p. 285). Taking Garlick's proposition further, this paper will elucidate the ways in which China's expansionism (through the medium of the Belt and Road), has come to challenge the very norms and assumptions which those theoretical frameworks are based upon. It is ultimately out of the amalgamation of these debates that this paper arises with the aim of going beyond surface-level predictions and outcomes, in order to assess the ways in which the Belt and Road challenges the very concepts that inform this process of analysis and sense-making.

The preliminary basis of analysis for this paper is drawn from official and unofficial sources which enable us to understand how the Belt and Road is expressed (and not expressed) in the contemporary discourse of Chinese elites. This discourse provides crucial insight into the ways in which Chinese elites interpret and elaborate upon official narratives of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and how elites are seeking to portray these narratives to foreign audiences. These particular facets of elite discourse offer a summation of how the Chinese state is communicating and imagining the Belt and Road. This paper will analyse the congruity of this portrayal with academic analyses of the Belt and Road both within and outside of China. Use of the term 'imaginaries' in this paper is drawn from Fairclough's (2003) critical discourse analysis, used to "denote elements of narratives or discourses" that "not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be)", but are also projective, "representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions" (Fairclough 2003, p. 124). These imaginaries are thus "elements of wider discourses, which we in turn understand as ways of representing aspects of the world—the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world" (Fairclough 2003, p. 124).

The following caveats must be noted throughout this paper's analysis:

i) The imaginaries represented here are not reflective of what *all* Chinese citizens think about the Belt and Road. Imaginations of the 'Silk Road' and China's place within its modern configuration have long "historical roots and expressions in popular culture, art and various social strata, some of which align well with government and elite narratives, and some which challenge these more or less directly" (Nordin and Weissmann 2018, p. 232).

ii) These imaginaries should not be understood as necessarily corresponding precisely with empirical data and the reality of 'on the ground activities' which have manifest to date under the heading of the Belt and Road. However, they are important "in shaping what happens 'on the ground' and are in turn shaped by the success or otherwise of concrete activities" (Nordin and Weissmann 2018, p. 232).

iii) The Belt and Road imaginaries outlined here, although selected for their prominence, should not be assumed as covering elite discourse or academic debate in their entirety. Rather, this paper and the sources it draws upon should be received as just one amalgamated piece of an elementary 'analytical puzzle', whose shape is constantly evolving and which will continue to be assembled for the foreseeable future.

Having laid out the paper rationale and an overview of the wider scholarly context and geopolitical debates relating to the Belt and Road here in Section I, the remainder of this paper will be structured in line with the following substantive segments of analysis:

Section II) This section will assess the nature of China's power and the extent to which it can project this, demonstrating that China has sought to utilise multilateral forums to pursue its great power trajectory. It will be argued that the Belt and Road represents a

defining opportunity for China to dictate and structure its own forms of institution-based international cooperation (on its own terms), while simultaneously fostering forms of 'geoeconomic hard power' capable of coercing and influencing states, moving beyond conventional notions of military-based hard power.

Section III) As outlined in this section's overview, a discursive dissonance within the Belt and Road with regards to its economic drivers and political ambitions has significantly shaped the ways in which the Belt and Road is understood and imagined. The discourse is dominated by perspectives on two seemingly contradictory forms of development - namely the enhancement of 'networked capitalism' on the one hand and the advancement of the 'Chinese national unit' on the other. This section will demonstrate how these divergent emphasises are in fact mutually supported and reinforcing in Belt and Road terms, which challenges the logic behind the ways in which the behaviour and interactions of states on the world stage are conventionally understood and critiqued. This analysis will be provided in the backdrop of globalised market-forces in which private market and centralised state forces and interests are increasingly interlinked.

Section IV) Based on the premise that IR convention and logic is derived from the prevailing system within which it is applied, this section will tie together and expand upon the previous analysis to assess the impact for world order and IR norms. Particular attention will be paid to the nature of the Chinese state and the ruling CCP, as well as the ways in which this has informed China's conception of the world through the communications and objectives outlined within the Belt and Road framework.

Section V) Concluding analysis and prospective outlooks will be provided.

'Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle,

but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting.' Sun Tzu.

Chapter II:

International Institutions and New Forms of Power –

Belt and Road as the Inevitable Culmination of 'Chinese-Centric Multilateralism'

In order to understand the significance of the Belt and Road in the wider context of China's ascendancy and its global implications, it is important to reflect upon the historical context out of which the Belt & Road and the rationale underpinning it have materialised into coordinated strategy and policy. Assessments of Chinese power, analysis of what this affords China in terms of position in the world, and questions regarding the challenge this presents to traditional understandings of power, all require an understanding in the first instance of the different measures and barometers by which power in conventional IR terms is measured and assessed.

From a strictly realist perspective, global powers are capable of exerting military power in any part of the world, something that has characterised US hegemony (Gulf War 1991, Kosovo 1999, Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003). China however, despite intensive and largely successful efforts to modernise and expand its armed forces, has not yet reached such military-based influence outside of its immediate periphery. Keohane (1969) makes the case that states at the highest level of the international order are 'system determining', playing a pivotal role in moulding the wider international system. Strange (1987) builds upon this idea of 'system determining' in her focus on the United States' possession of 'structural power' - "the power to choose and shape the structures of the global political economy within which other states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises, and (not least) their professional people have to operate" (Strange 1987, p. 32). The components of this structural power include "the ability to increase or decrease the security of others, to exercise control over production of goods and services, to determine the structure of finance and credit, and to have wide-ranging influence over ideas, information flows, and knowledge from many areas" (Strange 1987, p. 33). Being restricted by default from the first of these components (overarching military power) has resulted in China's pursuit of great power being predicated on these latter conduits of power pursuits, with the Belt and Road representing China's boldest attempt thus far to 'system-shape' the global political economy while building and consolidating 'structural power'.

China's trajectory towards this pursuit has been a gradual but accelerating process, and over the course of the last three decades, China has conducted itself in a way that is consistent with the behaviour of both a great power and rising global power. Efforts to consolidate an increasing number of global interests alongside its stature within the international system have intensified China's search for "a greater voice in its external environment" (Lanteigne 2005, p. 1). In pursuit of this 'greater voice', a defining feature of China's foreign policy development in the post-Cold War international system has

been a shift away from an inherent reluctance to engage with international organisations, towards an approach which actively embraces them as effective conduits for the fulfilment of international objectives and great power pursuit. China's manoeuvre towards this 'alternative' multilateral-driven acquisition of great power within an international system characterised by an increasing number of institutions, has been driven by two primary mitigating factors which have prevented it from traversing 'traditional' hard-power-based mutes to great power. The first of these barriers relates to the status and stature of the United States as the world's lone superpower after the Cold War, with China essentially lacking the power to balance US supremacy unilaterally and incapable of sufficiently gathering allies as a balancing force (as had been attempted by the Soviet Union in the 20th Century) (Lanteigne 2005, pp. 4-5). It is for the preservation and safeguarding of its security status that China has not demonstrated a willingness to engage in direct competition with the US and other great powers. The second barrier, linked in multi-layered ways to the first, is nuclear proliferation, which has transformed the prospect of great power conflict from a means of altering the power positions of states within the international system, to a scenario that would simply prove to be unacceptably and unfathomably costly to all sides involved (Lanteigne 2005, p. 6). China has thus somewhat inevitably maneuvered itself into a pursuit of global power which utilises the leverage afforded by international institutions and the various modes of cooperation afforded by them.

Several definitions have been proposed for 'international institutions', with Keohane (1988, p. 5) defining them as "a general pattern or organisation of an activity or to a particular human-constructed arrangement, formally or informally organised." Mearsheimer (1994, p. 72) meanwhile understands institutions as "a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other. [International institutions] prescribe acceptable forms of state behaviour, and proscribe unacceptable forms of state behaviour." Shaping the international system, structuring the global political economy to an extent which influences the way states interact and operate, and enhancing its forms of power projection are all lenses from which the Belt and Road can be analysed. The question that is thus pertinent to the wider question at hand is one regarding the extent to which the Belt and Road represents an evolutionary milestone in China's institutional and multilateral driven path of great power pursuit. It is argued here that the Belt and Road does indeed represent that milestone for China's great power trajectory, with the initiative providing a global medium through which China can continue its rhetoric of cooperation and multilateral engagement, while maintaining centrality over the ways in which global engagement is structured and the principles by which it is governed and maintained.

Beyond Conventional Hard Power: Sticky Power and Geoeconomic Hard Power

Before going on to assess the extent to which the Belt and Road serves as a structural framework for Chinese power ambitions, it is prudent to provide an overview of the *types* of power that China has sought to project on the world system through international and Chinese-led frameworks.

Since its theoretical inception, soft power has been lauded and analysed for its role as a strategic and diplomatic tool available to all states, breaking away from the dominance of hard power interpretations of the international arrangement of states. However, the argument has been made that a distinguishing feature of global powers from non-global powers is their ability to project soft power to a *considerable degree*, in line with what Nye (2004, p. 94) understands as "the ability to get desired outcomes because others want what you want" and "the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye 2004, p. 94). The United States has long been at the forefront of soft power and projection, with China lagging far behind for the most part. Indeed, 'Liberal' or 'Western' ideals of society and politics, whatever label they may be ascribed and through whatever mediums of culture and communication they may be spread, continue to hold considerably more worldwide leverage than values and ideals tied to Chinese state identity. This is something that has been made abundantly clear to the Chinese Communist Pity (CCP) during ongoing protests in Hong Kong, in which support for the values of democracy, civil liberties, rule of law, and human rights protections has provided a central narrative to counter what the protestors view as the encroachment of CCP power and governance (Pubrick 2019, pp. 3-4). A recent survey found only a tiny minority of Hong Kong citizens considered themselves 'Chinese', representing a sharp decrease in identity allegiance from 20 years ago and reflecting the inherent struggle that China has in terms of attraction and soft power leverage, even within its own peripheries (Hong Kong Public Research Institute: The Economist 2019). The prospect of China exerting considerable soft power influence on a global scale appears even more unlikely when taking into consideration that China lags behind in soft power terms not just globally, but even on a regional scale. South Korea in particular has had considerably more success in cultivating a 'positive' image of itself, raising its profile throughout East Asia and beyond through the ever-growing popularity of its distinctive brands of K-pop, K- dramas, sports industry, and the general consolidation of an international image based on 'progressive openness', creativity, and innovation (Huat 2012). Contrastingly, indicators suggest that despite general acknowledgment of China's achievements as an economic powerhouse, even large-scale global events such as the Beijing Olympics struggled to improve generally negative perceptions of China in global terms, and have in fact often reinforced a sense of dissonance between the West and China.

Thus, faced with the prospect of hard-power barriers and a seemingly inherent disposition for lacking soft power leverage, China has sought to utilise the main competitive advantage that it does have at its disposal - its status as an economic behemoth. China has demonstrated how a selective engagement and interaction with international institutions can be essential to augmenting power in the international system while also providing a means of expanding state power that was previously inaccessible to great powers. Subsequently, the question in the context of the Belt and Road becomes one of whether China can defy established IR precedent and logic by achieving global or superpower status in the *absence of military strength* that can unilaterally exert itself across the world.

While hard and soft power have a long and established centrality in International Relations, much less prominent is the notion of 'sticky power', which Mead (2004, p.

17) defines as “the ability to enmesh other actors within economic linkages to the point where any attempts to withdraw would carry large risks and costs”. It is argued here the Belt and Road represents an unrivalled platform from which China can seek to combine soft power and sticky power to an extent that is unprecedented in International Relations. A particularly controversial aspect of the Belt and Road is the perceived prevalence of ‘debt-trap diplomacy'. This refers to a form of diplomacy whereby a creditor country intentionally extends excessive credit (often in the form of asset-based lending, including infrastructure) to a debtor country, with the supposed intention of being afforded economic or political concessions once the inevitable point is reached at which the debtor country is unable to fulfil its debt obligations. Chinese loans (mainly provided for strategic ports) account for 77% of Djibouti’s national debt, whilst it was also recently reported that Pakistan now owes more money to Beijing than to the IMF (Bloomberg News 2019). These are just two examples of the extent to which debt can become a defining factor of international relations. The intertwining of interests to a degree in which one becomes subservient to the other is elucidated by the extent to which China is able to hold economic leverage over states lured by the prospect of development and much needed quick financing.

During a 2012 interview with Graham Allison, Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore’s first Prime Minister 1959-1990) offered a fundamentally different perspective from the then US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s admission that the concept of global balance of power was ‘obsolete’ (Allison 2017, p. 20). Yew instead viewed the concept in terms of a ‘fundamental building block in understanding relations between states’, explaining that, “In the old concept, balance of power meant largely military power. In today’s terms, it is a combination of economic and military, and I think *the economic outweighs the military*” (Yew 2012, cited in Allison 2017, p. 20. emphasis added).

This new construction of ‘balance of power’ is gaining greater prominence and has been labelled as ‘geoeconomics’ - defined as the use of economic instruments (including foreign aid, trade, investment, and even cyber-attacks), for the purposes of achieving geopolitical objectives (Allison 2017). This concept is explored in detail by Blackwill and Harris (201 6, p. 17) who argue that China is “the world’s leading practitioner of geoeconomics, but it has also been perhaps the major factor in returning regional or global power projection back to an importantly economic (as opposed to political-military) exercise.” In June 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement at the United Nations which was critical of China’s human rights record (Reuters 2017). Despite there being little to no military engagement between the two countries, the power of geoeconomics as an almost coercive form of power is becoming increasingly clear to observe, and a phenomenon which those within the field of IR should pay increasing critical attention towards.

Chinese authorities and state elites have optimistically and unequivocally embraced the conception of a world system which articulates economic power relations and dependence at the heart of its economy. As such, “the global economy is less a level playing field than an organized system in which some countries occupy privileged positions and others, such as China, try to rise to these commanding heights” (Macaes 2018, p. 7).

Situating the Belt and Road within China's Institution and Multilateral Focused Power Pursuit

Macaes (2018, p. 24) posits that the Belt and Road is "global in nature. Its ruling principle is interdependence, a close network of common interests by which every country's development is affected by the development path in other countries." This draws on President Xi's 2013 speech in Jakarta, delivered to promote the Belt and Road, in which the initiative was referred to as a "community of shared destiny" (Macaes 2018, p. 8). This built upon an expression which has featured in Chinese communications since as early as 2007 to describe relations between Taiwan and mainland China. This application to China's relations on a global scale has been interpreted as a reformulation or modernisation of the ancient concept of *Tianxia*, which has been successfully proliferated and popularised in recent times by a number of scholars, most notably Zhao Tingyang. Zhao's work is based on the argument that the defining characteristic of the modern world is that it remains "a Hobbesian stage of chaos, conflict, non co-operation and anarchy", as opposed to a spectrum of political unity (cited in Macaes 2018, p. 54). This reformulation provided a potent means through which China could frame political concepts in a way that was distinct from Western and American co-opted ideas of global order, and it was thus perhaps an inevitability that that Tianxia would come to represent the ideological foundation of the Belt and Road. This 'Tianxian' basis of 'a community of shared destiny' as theory, and the Belt and Road as practice, conjoin to form the "dialectical unity of theory and practice, goals and paths, value rationality and instrumental rationality" (Macaes 2018, p. 76). "The general principle of Tianxia—which literally means All-Under-Heaven or World—is that relations between units or actors determine the obligations corresponding to their network ties" (Macaes 2018, p. 77). The basis of relations under the purview of Tianxia can be perceived of in terms of 'mutual benefit' or 'win-win cooperation', which once established take precedence over individual choices. Western-derived and Westphalians modes of association, which are contrastingly based on the autonomy of individual units and clearly defined boundaries between Self and Other, are thus excluded from this worldview in which no entity can perceive its functioning in isolated terms. These individual units "exist in Xi's community of shared destiny, from which—and contrary to the dreams of Western political thought—it is impossible to escape" (Macaes 2018, p. 15). The Belt and Road integrates this notion through the assertion that the challenges facing China cannot be confronted in isolation but only through relations with other individual units in mutually beneficial terms.

As Xi stated during the 'Boao Forum for Asia' in 2015, "only through win-win cooperation can we make big and sustainable achievements that are beneficial to all. The old mind set of zero-sum game should give way to a new approach of win-win and all-win cooperation. The interests of others must be accommodated while pursuing one's own interests, and common development must be promoted while seeking one's own development" (cited in Macaes 2018, p. 34). This should be understood as an ideological shift representing a radical and significant development in Chinese foreign policy. As the preceding analysis of China's great power trajectory confirms, Beijing has long acknowledged the benefits of economic globalisation. However, Xi's

leadership and the ambitions of the Belt and Road represent an embrace of political and cultural dimensions of globalisation as an opportunity, in contrast to the suspicion that guided its prior approach. Enhancing and facilitating the flow of political and cultural influence beyond state boundaries is posited over the creation of new barriers, while the Belt and Road even advocates forms of innovation which well-established institutions such as the European Union have made limited progress in, such as economic policy coordination. Further initiatives indicative of China's institution-based conception of world society and order include the construction of a dispute settlement mechanism, constituted of three international commercial courts, which aim to protect the legal rights and interests of both Chinese and foreign parties. A court in Xian will be dedicated to dealing with commercial disputes along the Silk Road Economic Belt, a court in Shenzhen will deal with cases which rise along the 21st Maritime Silk Road, and Beijing will host the headquarters of the 'Belt and Road court'. This projection of 'rule of law' principles and the new 'political confidence' that is represented by these developments has inspired "dreams of infusing the global order with Chinese values, simultaneously reducing fears of Western cultural imperialism" (Macaes 2018, p. 13).

China has clearly long pursued a multilateral-focused and institution-based approach to its growing clout and presence on the international stage, and the trajectory being followed in the Belt and Road should thus be of no surprise. However, what does distinguish the Belt and Road in terms of its geopolitical implications is the fact that it now demonstrates how China is now "much less afraid of political and cultural globalization because it now believes they can be shaped according to a Chinese model" (Macaes 2018, p. 13). In 2012, the report for the 18th National Congress of the CPC made the case that: "In promoting mutually beneficial cooperation, we should raise awareness about human beings sharing a community of common destiny. A country should accommodate the legitimate concerns of others when pursuing its own interests; and it should promote common development of all countries when advancing its own development." The extent to which the ideological foundation of the Belt and Road has been successfully fused within existing institutions and ideals of global governance was exemplified in 2017 when a proposition to 'build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind' became part of a UN and UNSC resolution, while the proposition's core premise of 'achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration' was incorporated into the UN General Assembly's resolution on global governance.

Under the premise that the Belt and Road embodies and evokes unprecedented questions for the field of International Relations, it should necessarily be predicated that the Belt and Road itself represents an unprecedented concept. Parallels have naturally been drawn to the European Union - "the most significant contemporary example of cooperation between states". However, there are fundamental differences between the two. The Belt and Road overlooks the establishment of a body of supranational institutions, but reaches the heart of national sovereignty through the projection of state-relation decision making in which every decision is in principle open to external influence. In other words, "national sovereignty is never renounced, but neither is it affirmed or consecrated. Tianxia is neither national nor supranational" (Macaes 2018). In many ways, it is far from clear what exactly is constituted by the Belt and Road, with the name often appearing to represent a catch-all term for Chinese overseas

development and engagement initiatives. Perhaps, as Macaes (2018) suggests, the Belt and Road should be understood by theorists as "a name and little more than a name", but a powerfully symbolic name whose "most obvious advantage is that it brings together a number of new, highly significant developments: China's growing international clout, its need to reshape the international economic system in its image and the growing reactions and responses to that project". Thus, if the Belt and Road is to be understood somewhat paradoxically as simultaneously 'shapeless and highly ambitious', then it would perhaps be more theoretically sound to compare the Belt and Road with a geopolitical concept such as that of 'the West' and the epochal significance it has come to acquire.

Linking back to the interplay between economic and political forces, from an economic perspective, "China will be organizing and leading an increasing share of global supply chains, reserving for itself the most valuable segments of production and creating strong links of collaboration and infrastructure with other countries , whose main role in the system will be to occupy lower value segments." From a political standpoint, Beijing is hoping to benefit from the implementation of a 'feedback mechanism', much the same way that the West has benefited over the past century - "deeper links of investment, infrastructure and trade can be used as leverage to shape relations with other countries even more in its favor. The process feeds on itself" (Macaes 2018). The Belt and Road ultimately represents a cumulative but distinctively radical shift beyond the concept of international institutions towards an '*international regime'*, defined by (Krasner 1983) and (Martin 1999) as "the idea of a larger set of political constructions of which institutions are a part". As will be explored in the following chapter, this international regime should be viewed as a precursor for a global order infused with Chinese political principles and placing China at its heart.

"Only when you know why you have hit the target, can you truly say you have learned archery."

Guan Yinzi, Warring States Period (475-221 BC)

Chapter III:

A Nationalist, Capitalist Fusion: Simultaneously Advancing the Objectives of Networked Capitalism and the Chinese National Unit

This section of the paper will describe how seemingly contradictory understandings of the Belt and Road outlined in the previous sections are in fact mutually reinforcing. This is indicative of a transformation towards a spatialised international landscape in which states interact with one another in increasingly fragmented ways. Within this landscape, the interplay between state and non-state forces feeds into centralised state objectives in more indirect and less predictable ways. These contradictory understandings relate to the pursuit of 'networked capitalism' in one direction and an advancement of the 'Chinese national unit' in the other. As part of a discursive separation, most existing literature on the Belt and Road can be grouped into one of these two distinct categories, both of which are rooted in official Chinese documents and both of which reflect predominant academic discussions on China's role in the world. The nature of this separation is arguably a reflection of the ways in which capitalist structures have been constructed as paradigms in which private for-profit trade and industry activities are understood as endeavours distinct from state endeavours in the political and geopolitical sense.

After providing an overview of both discursive categories, the case will be made here that rather than representing a contradiction in terms, networked capitalism and the national unit are imagined in mutually supporting ways in the context of the Belt and Road, and by extension have the potential to be pursued as such. Demonstrations of ways in which this potential has already been realised will be provided using case studies in which Belt and Road activity has transcended conventional boundaries and means of engagement between sending and receiving states. The implications for this in IR terms relate to the ways in which Realist, Liberalist, and derivative schools of thought understand states to be homogeneous entities interacting in mainly linear and direct ways with one another, reflecting prevailing Westphalian order which emphasises individual state sovereignty. Central to the conceptions which challenge this orthodoxy are the role of private companies driven by capitalist pursuits and a Belt and Road perspective of a world in which connectivity between metropolitan 'nodes' takes precedence over conventional understandings of state-to-state engagement.

Capitalist Endeavour

The first of these discursive imaginaries is a conceptualization strongly emphasised particularly by scholars drawing on Marxist theory or liberal perspectives of economic interdependence. This understanding views the Belt and Road as a fundamentally or

exclusively capitalist endeavour, pursued primarily for the purposes of enriching Chinese stakeholders and contributing to the continuation of China's GDP growth. A central theological basis of this understanding relates to the proliferation of the 'network society' as a metaphorical means of understanding global political economy, in which global networks that connect *metropolitan regions* are increasingly dominant (see Castell 2010). The idea of nodes in global networks as a form of 'spatial configuration' is a significant shift away from the previously dominant perspective of an "allocation of resources on the basis of national spaces or 'surfaces"' (Nordin and Weissmann 2019, p. 235). One of the key reasons for embracing this conception in the Belt and Road context is the way in which the 'five connections' or 'five connectivities' which the CCP 2015 vision document prioritises accumulate into "a platform for enhancing the flows of capital, goods and consumers (as tourists or students) across Eurasia" (Nordin and Weissmann 2019, p. 235). These five priorities are listed as: 'policy coordination, facilities connectivity (e.g. infrastructure and communications), unimpeded trade (e.g. free trade areas and customs cooperation), financial integration (linking internationalization of the renminbi with the establishment of new development banks) and a 'people-to-people bond' (which is moulded through engagements such as student exchanges and tourism)." (CCP Vision Document 2015).

Illustration of the collective Belt and Road Initiative - Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (SOURCE: Xinhua in China Daily). It is interesting to note in this map how 'metropolitan nodes' take precedence over demarcated state spaces, indicating the kind of 'global connectivity' that China envisions via the Belt and Road.

Geostrategic Logic

The second discursive imaginary is a geostrategic logic emphasised mainly by scholars drawing from notions of national identity rooted in constructivist thought, alongside realists whose understandings of a balance of power are rooted in 'national zero-sum terms'. This 'discursive construction of a Sinocentric order' (Nordin and Weissmann 2019, p. 236), variably tends to deploy geostrategic language, focuses upon ideas of the 'China dream' and *silu jingshen* (the 'Silk Road spirit). It is this narrative that tends to draw parallels with the US Marshall Plan.

The geostrategic logic has been used to explain China's use of the Belt and Road to fulfil its regional ambitions, by for example, diminishing the influence and role of India in South Asia and increasing its engagement throughout East Asia to further establish its regional presence ahead of the United States. The geostrategic logic also draws upon ideas of Chinese leadership and pursuit of superpower status, as part of which the Belt and Road is an essential platform through which China can forge alliances, build networks and establish global norms for the conduct of international relations. A strengthened geostrategic position is viewed as crucial to China's leverage with regards to international issues such as the South China Sea dispute and separatist sentiment in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thus, the geostrategic logic is as much concerned with the CCP's strength and longevity domestically as it is with China's position in international terms.

Reinterpreting the State and Cross-Border Activity through the Belt and Road's Mutual Reinforcement of Capitalist and Nationalist Motives

As opposed to diametrically challenging or undermining one another, the Belt and Road has enabled the pursuits of the 'Chinese nationalist unit' and 'networked capitalism' to fuse in ways which ultimately "reinforce Chinese government narratives that portray China as the new trailblazer of global capitalism, which it will lead better than the United States, specifically illustrating and justifying a new Sinocentric order in and beyond east Asia" (Nordin and Weissmann 2018, p. 232). Reflective of this, tangible and ongoing forms of cross-border activity within the framework of the Belt and Road have been subjected to the same discursive separation discussed above, while nonetheless suggesting a tangible fusion between the two upon deconstructive and holistic analysis.

Central to both discursive frameworks is the centrality and primacy of the state as an autonomous actor understood in singular terms, which engages with corresponding actors through coherent strategies and in direct, linear fashion. The process of deconstructing this predominance of the state in singular terms is especially significant when seeking to understand the ways in which this state-driven capitalism may manifest in ways that are unprecedented from IR perspectives and conventional understandings of power expansion. Despite divergent perspectives on the ways in which the world is ordered, state motives, and conceptions of power, the state has long represented the

central lens from which crucial issues of geopolitics are understood and explained across the broad spectrum of International Relations. It thus naturally follows that International Relations exhibits a predominant preoccupation with the "personalities, values, and long-range strategic visions of key elite state actors" (Akhter 2018, p. 222).

In order to deconstruct this narrative in the Belt and Road context, this section will utilise potent case studies from South Asia - a region in China's immediate periphery that has played a formative role in the development of China's expansionist vision. In particular, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPES) is widely perceived of as the flagship project of the Belt and Road, while Sri Lanka has for some time been a major recipient of Chinese transformative developmental assistance. In critically deconstructing China's engagement with these countries and identifying the spaces, actors, and drivers which have shaped the modern paradigm of Sino-Sri Lankan and Sino-Pak relations, it will be demonstrated that the Belt and Road challenges conventional logic upon which much of International Relations theory is based, highlighting a degree of stagnancy through a failure to sufficiently account for globalist forces and their transformative power upon states in of themselves, as well as the means through which relations between states are constructed and conducted.

Realist perspectives are centred around a worldview in which functionally identical states engage in perennial struggles for power within an inherently anarchical environment. Central to realist analyses are the ideas that state ambition grows parallel to their power, rapid economic development can shift the balance of power, and power itself represents a tangible force (Mearsheimer 1995, p. 91). These narratives lend themselves to the long-running saga of a struggle for regional hegemony and global influence between rising powers India and China (Hong 2016, p. 26). Within this paradigm, smaller and less powerful host states with which China engages possess analytical value only in relation to their role in facilitating and manoeuvring power and the direction in which it travels (Shambaugh 2005, pp. 95-95). China's relationships with small-power states within and outside of its immediate periphery are thus interpreted as an assertion of its growing dominance through the process of resource accumulation and economic dependency, alongside the institutionalisation of those processes (Callaghan 2016, p. 228). The fact that India has failed to secure its status as regional hegemon adds credence to this line of thought, with China provided space within which to exploit the lack of regional integration and connectivity.

It thus appears intuitive to interpret the cautiousness and aversion with which India has approached the Belt and Road as reflective of the forces of material power that India is competing with, alongside the economic and security repercussions that Indian officials foresee being potentially confronted with (Jeganaathan 2017, p. 160). However, this stance in isolation is an insufficient premise from which to understand China-India relations in the backdrop of China's expansionist policies. In comparison to views rooted in the realist school of thought, liberal-based ideologies place greater emphasis on the potential for economic interdependence and networks of institutions to leverage power over and between the conduct of other states (Keohane and Nye 1977, pp. 167-173). China and India have a long and established relationship as substantial trading partners, have demonstrated constructive cooperation with each other in multilateral forums, and have participated in joint military exercises. The Indian government even

went as far as to support China's development of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as part of its international efforts (Yu 2017, p. 366). It is also significant that China has specifically pursued diplomatic efforts to engage India and secure its buy-in through a Belt and Road narrative centred around the themes of "strategy connectivity" and "policy coordination" (Hong 2016, p. 30). With this context in mind, an account of China-South Asia relations cannot be wholly explained in terms of hard power and the securement of hegemony. A more coherent perspective must give due consideration to the power of economic drivers and the gains and losses that arise for participant states. In line with this, facilitating the movement of materials and services across borders has been identified as one of the Belt and Road's core functions, for the purposes of maintaining production and consumption cycles and sustaining growth of the Chinese economy (Yu 2017, p. 356-357). Shipping remains the most cost-efficient means of maintaining China's importation and consumption of a considerable global share of "fuels, raw material, and semi-finished goods" (Yu 2017, p. 357). Thus in the context of the Belt and Road, China's expansion of its port network in collaboration with countries such as Pakistan, which provides a strategically valuable cargo route to China's western regions, are vital measures in keeping up with the growing demands of its progressively affluent population and export-driven economy (Yu 2017, p. 358). Pivotal to this sense-making are ideas of 'grand strategy' emanating from the central actor (China) and the role of participant states as willing and autonomous beneficiaries of this coherent integration and connectivity (Hameiri and Jones 2016, p. 73). It is thus clear that understandings of both economic and political objectives need to be accounted for when assessing the type of engagement that China has made a cornerstone of its foreign policy. However, what is lacking from these prevailing perspectives is the ways in which the fragmentation of the state plays out in cross-border cooperation and how the role of non-state actors and state actors interact to mutually reinforce capitalist endeavours and geopolitical ambition.

Ultimately, the state is indeed the pivotal driver in fiscal and industrial cross-border activity, while state elites in sending and receiving countries are the primary means through which the fusion of public development, integration, and connectivity are negotiated and facilitated (Kataria and Naveed 2014, p. 398-400). However, what the Belt and Road brings to the fore in this context is the significance of non-state actors as integral shapers of the ways in which state relations are conducted, to an extent in which the conceptual assumptions about the autonomy and boundaries of the state are directly challenged. This is something that both realist and liberalist schools of thought have failed to adequately keep pace with (Hameiri and Jones 2016, p. 76).

Spatialised Engagement and the Analytical 'Territorial Trap'

Much analysis of China's engagement via the Belt and Road has been constrained by what Agnew (1994, p. 53) describes as a "territorial trap" in analytic terms. This trap refers to instances in which fragmented 'social space' and 'state space' exist as distinct entities, but are analytically conflated with one another (Akhter 2018, p. 222).

Boni (2016, p. 500) asserts that "the development of economic cooperation between Pakistan and China has been instrumental in a broader, army-led security vision of China-Pakistan relations", while "policy continuity towards China is a result of a broad-

based consensus among the Pakistani elites". In line with this, state narratives on Sino-Pak cooperation have framed logistical infrastructure as fundamentally "connective and integrative" in nature (Abid and Ashfaq 2015, pp. 159-163).

In contrast to 'state spaces', Akhter (2018, p. 223) highlights how 'social spaces' are spaces which state elites can only ever have limited influence and oversight over. Akhter (2018, pp. 236-237) further describes how Pakistan's 'underdeveloped peripheral regions' have come to represent highly fragmented and dissociated spaces, in which anti-state sentiment may in fact intensify in response to the militarisation of development projects and the extent to which Pakistani state objectives are tied to activity taking place in those regions. The connectivity espoused via the Belt and Road also intersects this state space-social space dissonance through the ways in which infrastructure and integrative technology may also be used by militant factions and separatist groups (Lim 2017, pp. 1-4). Related to this is the extent to which the success of China's global ambitions, as envisioned through the Belt and Road, necessitates engagement with non-state and even *anti-state* actors. In 2018, the Financial Times (Bokhari and Stacey 2018) revealed how China has been engaged in covert negotiations with separatist militants from Pakistan's Balochistan region, in order to protect its immense infrastructural investments in the region.

What the Belt and Road brings to the fore in an International Relations context is the fact that "state space is never entirely smooth, frictionless, and bereft of any historical traces" (Akhter 2018, p. 233). With this in mind, it is perhaps a "multiscalar approach" that will best assist us to understand state strategy, market-driven capitalist forces, logistical and infrastructure-based globalisation, and disparate social spaces as a tangled web of "complex geopolitical forces". The need to establish this represents a significant harbinger for an International Relations field that has for the most part been fundamentally centred on the premise that the state represents an "intentional agent interacting *only* with other similarly intentioned state actors" (Akhter 2018, p. 237, emphasis added).

Thus, the ways in which state relations between states are theorised does not sufficiently take into account the ways in which cross-border engagement actually manifests itself within a particular country. This is something that has been encapsulated in the activities of Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) along the Belt and Road route and the ways in which they have transitioned from facilitators of policy implementation to fully-fledged actors which actively influence state policy and the means through which relations between states are conducted.

Sinister examples of this phenomenon include the 2012 revelation that Chinese spies had hacked into the UK defence firm BAE Systems to steal data about a $264 billion USD fighter jet. Six years later in 2018, it was revealed that China had spied on the African Union headquarters built by Chinese companies in Addis Ababa, with servers at the headquarters transferring data to Shanghai. This progression from state-sponsored espionage to state-espionage facilitated by infrastructure-driven development (in which private companies played a key role) shows the particular difficulty in separating state and non-state actors. This is poignant in the context of China and its global ambitions,

particularly given the centrality of infrastructure connectivity and development to the Belt and Road strategy.

The most high-profile contemporary example of the interplay between private companies and the Chinese state is the case of Huawei, whose equipment has been blocked from the development of 5G mobile networks in a number of states, as a result of it being considered a security threat due to perceptions of its close ties with the Chinese state. Reflecting fears associated with economic advancement at the expense of potentially serious geopolitical repercussions, Timothy Heath, a senior international defence research analyst at the RAND Corporation stated that:

"The threat is legitimate, given the murky links between Huawei and Chinese authorities. The Chinese state has the authority to demand tech companies like Huawei turn over useful information or provide access to the communications and technologies owned and sold by Huawei." (Washington Post 2019).

While these two cases are representative of cases where this private-state symbiosis has backfired on China, in the case of the Belt and Road this has often proven to be a crucial means through which capitalist drivers and nationalist objectives are reinforced as part of a complex and interlinked process, as will be discussed below.

Intersecting Interests, Independent Actors: The Convergence of Chinese Commercial and Chinese State Objectives in Sri Lanka

Analysis of Chinese development initiatives and investment-based interactions with Sri Lanka has largely followed the following three trajectories: 1) "an instance of economic statecraft in which strategic and political ambitions supersede the pursuit of economic gains"; 2) a means of "securing resource security in return for aid or development programmes"; 3) "an inherent component of a developmental state", in which the government directs and defines the economic activity of for-profit companies in host states which require developmental and financial assistance (Brautigam and Xiaoyang 2012, pp. 800, 801, 802).

Focusing on the China Harbour Engineering Group's (CHEG) developmental work in Sri Lank, Zhu (2015) discusses how CHEG gained entry to Sri Lanka through China's provision of foreign assistance following the 2004 Tsunami which destroyed significant swathes of the country's public infrastructure. CHEG's fundamental role at this stage was clearly defined and discernible as an *implementer* of agreements negotiated between Chinese and Sri Lankan state elites. However, CHEG's role in Sri Lanka began to evolve parallel to the extent that it was able to autonomously outline initiatives to develop state infrastructure in ways that merged with the objectives of Sri Lanka's government, whose interests were guided by the need for rapid and cost-efficient development to help pacify civil discontent. One of the most drastic examples of this was the huge-scale development of the small coastal town of Hambantota into a major international shipping port. The fact that CHEG, in its scope as an independent entity, had initiated this process and taken the lead on securing the buy-in of state elites demonstrates the blurred and interlinked boundaries between state and non-state actors

in transnational development and investment activity. In relation to the question at hand, there is a clear distinction that must be noted between foreign policy strategy espoused by Chinese state officials and CHEG's capitalist objectives defined by its role as a profit-driven private company. Both are driving factors behind the expression of developmental activity itself but are manifest and directed in divergent ways. In this case, CHEG had transformed itself into taking on a role which was less of a vehicle for the Chinese state, and more of a bridge across which Chinese and Sri Lankan objectives could converge. CHEG has thus maintained high-level and direct interactions with the Sri Lankan state, pursuing its market-driven objectives *independently* of Chinese government financing or instruction (Zhu 2015, p. 8).

It should not be assumed however that geopolitical state interests will necessarily always overlap with the economic and capitalistic interests of market actors. The globalised transformation of states into "increasingly fragmented, decentralised and internationalised" entities (Hameiri and Jones 2016, p. 73) alongside the agency of market actors, means that the trajectory of state engagement and strategy is unlikely to be linear and may be expressed in unforeseen and complex ways. Thus, what the Belt and Road brings to the fore is the potential for non-state actors to influence international relations in significantly more direct and less predictable ways, with the Belt and Road being driven by the objectives of private entities as well as the Chinese state. Consequently, there are a number of pertinent questions to be asked regarding CCP influence in the running of Chinese companies, the extent to which companies exercise autonomy at home and abroad, and potential security repercussions arising from the normalised involvement of non-state actors in state-to-state engagement.

"I think it'd be good if people compare Xi's speech at Davos and President Trump's speech in his inaugural. You'll see two different worldviews."

Steve Bannon.

Chapter IV: Worldviews

If the essential function and purpose of International Relations is to evaluate, predict and rationalise conduct on the world stage between global actors, then the ways in which the world and its core components are structured, perceived, and interact with each other must form the foundational basis of this theoretical practice. Consequently, the most significant and broad-ranging impact in the IR context of this paper relates to the extent to which the Belt and Road may facilitate the crystallization of a 'Chinese world order'. Given that this envisioned order is markedly distinctive in character from the Westphalian system with its own palpable and historically/geographically distinct roots, an overview of the ways in which this order may subvert Westphalia becomes of paramount importance. The ways in which the current international system is ordered (from which international relations draws its main points of reference) arguably represents a substantial reflection of the powers which have dominantly prevailed over world politics. Some analysts of the Belt and Road have approached this question from the perspective of fulfilling the 'Chinese Dream', as part of a marked departure from the current system towards an explicitly 'Chinese World Order'. In addressing these possibilities, this section will draw upon from the analysis of the previous sections and relate them to the historical context of the Tianxia world structure and the restrictive nature of polity pursued by the CCP. This will be done in order to assess the impact of China's utilisation of the Belt and Road as a conduit not only for global leverage, but also domestic consolidation of power within its own internal borders. This will specifically relate to the potential for a transformed world order which reflects the primacy and centrality of the Chinese state, or rather Chinese civilisation in the holistic sense.

Westphalia v Centralia: The Domestic Drivers of China's Foreign Policy

As part of a comprehensive overview of Chinese order and worldview, or what is termed 'Centralia' for contrasting effect against Westphalia, Wang (2017) describes how Chinese history and 'ecogeography' has reinforced the political rise of the CCP, which has absorbed and expounded the same authoritarian and totalitarian ethos that have prevailed throughout much of China's history. Making reference to the two dynasties that were formative in this formation, Wang (2017) describes the political umbrella of Chinese civilisation and the CCP as a 'Qin-Han polity', which is characterised by a constant totalitarian need to sustain itself and maintain ordered hegemony within its borders, seeking to achieve this through the consolidation of outside forces into the realms of its polity and order. Only through the establishment of a singular socio-political system – Tianxia (referenced in the previous chapter), can the "oneness, all-inclusiveness, unity, centrality, and totality of the whole world" be ensured to achieve

"order, harmony, and to maximise 'world interests' and 'world rights' rather than the inherently divisive and conflicting individual human and group, unit, nation-state rights and interests" (Wang, 2017, p. 210). The significance of the fact that these very 'rights and interests' serve as the core of the Westphalian structure needs little explanation, and demonstrates how a Chinese state which embodies this perspective is unlikely to embrace an inevitable continuation of the current world structure if it has the sufficient means to establish its 'natural order'. J. Wang (2015), a prominent Chinese scholar of international relations went as far as to argue that: "Only if the US respects - and does not challenge - China's basic political system and the rule of the Communist Party, will it be able to persuade China to do the same *vis a vis* America's leadership position in the world" (J. Wang 2015).

According to Christensen (2015, pp. 288-289), the 'real' Chinese challenge exists not just in the form of "regional security challenges" but also "global governance challenges". This interplay between the Chinese state and global governance is centred around a 'structural tension' that has "predestined the PRC into endless striving for regime survival and security with epic dramas, great uncertainties, and profound implications" (Wang 2017, p. 195). At the root of this structural tension is the somewhat ironic reality that the Chinese state in its CCP-PRC form has been "created, rescued and empowered by *external* factors and forces" (Wang 2017, p. 195, emphasis added). Official state ideology (Marxism-Leninism), foundations of political legitimacy such as nationalist rhetoric and state-driven development, and technological advancement all represent essential pillars of the modern Chinese state which have been externally sourced. The rapid, sustained, and unparalleled growth of China's economy alongside key socio-cultural changes have been facilitated within the framework of international trade and finance, to the extent that China has clearly been rewarded for its comprehensive integration into the US-led Westphalian global system and structure. A contextual and nuanced understanding of the Belt and Road with reference to the complex nature of China's ascendancy thus suggests that it is actually the Western-centric US-led liberal order that has afforded China the necessary opportunities, innovation, and leverage to develop the means of formulating coherent world strategy while pursuing its international ambitions. Some have thus posited that the Belt and Road should not be taken as a harbinger for a radical departure from this liberal order towards an entirely new global system. Scholars of this line of thought assert it is likely that instead of upturning the prevailing global system, China will seek to assert itself via the Belt and Road as *a better alternative to US leadership* over a prevailing global order that it understands in fundamentally capitalist and free market terms.

However, this paper makes the case that despite the clear and tangible benefits that the Westphalian system and its institutions have afforded the Chinese state, the nature of the CPP's basis for ruling legitimacy and power consolidation means that the fulfilment of Tianxia and an external projection of a China Order is a process parallel to the maintenance of internal power. The reason for this is the *Qin-Han polity*, a concept coined by Professor Fei-Ling Wang, which has guided the founding, development, and guiding principles of the CCP. According to Wang (2017, pp. 39, 46), the Qin-Han polity is "a Confucianism-coated Legal[ist] authoritarian or totalitarian autocracy that is predestined and compelled" by a "powerful inner logic" to "order and rule the entire

[known] world . . . in reality or in pretension". Wang (2017, p. 195) further argues that "a Qin-Han polity, whatever its color and decoration or whoever the ruling group, can hardly be peaceful and content when there are other uncontrolled and ungoverned yet undeniable powers in coexistence and competition." For a confident, assured, and powerful Qin-Han polity, "the China order of the whole known world is the logical and prized destiny" (Wang 2017, p. 195).

Shambaugh (2013, p. 56) concludes that one of the central drivers of Chinese diplomacy is to "support the Chinese Communist Party and keep the regime in power." Indeed, this is reflected in the ways in which China has caricatured 'enemies' and expressed disdain for countries and international organisations critical of the CCP, including those who would previously be referred to as 'comrades at arms'. Ultimately, the CCP is inseparable from the Chinese state - its future and ambitions are inherently tied to the future and ambitions of China to an extent that is simply not feasible in democratic states. Established constitutional constraints on the unilateral scope of government via rule of law and balance of power mechanisms, serve to prevent abuses of power, limit the extent to which governments can pursue policy, and impose time limits on future outlook, projects, and strategy. While the rationale and virtues of these constraints are well established in political discourse in terms of the purpose they serve for political freedom and human liberty, they have ultimately served to provide an advantageous leverage to China and the CCP who have pursued and implemented an extremely long-term and assertive strategy for the fulfilment of its global ambitions.

Situating the Belt and Road in World Order Transition: Reinforcing Interplay Between American Isolationism and Chinese Expansionism

As the US increasingly finds itself in the shadows of China and the regional/global alliances that are materialising across Eurasia and Africa, it is becoming increasingly unclear as to what extent the current order can preserve itself, especially given the centrality of US hegemony and dominance to its very existence. China's natural starting point for the Belt and Road was its immediate neighbourhood, and as Macaes (2018) notes, "the state of China's relations with the rest of the world finds expression, first and foremost, in the changing relations between China and its neighbors" … but, "one's neighbors have neighbors of their own, so these relations will have to be extended. The Belt and Road is global in nature." The proposed 'extension' of these relations is significant in relation to Allison's (2017, p. 126) analysis that, "Chinese leaders recognize that the role the US has played since World War II as the guardian of regional stability and security has been essential to the rise of Asia, including China itself. But they believe that as the tide that brought the US to Asia recedes, America must leave with it." The immensity of this significance lies in the fact that if China intends to proliferate the hegemony, influence, and norms it has established from a regional to global scale, then it follows by default that the global presence of the US must decline in parallel to China's ascendancy. However, analysis which interprets this as simply representing a change in 'global leadership' ignores the historical context and civilisational influence out of which Chinese state elites have come to view the world and their place within it.

Having provided an overview of the dissonance between a US-led Westphalia and a China-led Centralia, alongside the ways in which the pursuit of the latter serves to represent an ultimate destiny for the ruling Chinese Communist Party, it is now necessary to assess how the Belt and Road fits into this narrative. If the 'China dream' as articulated in a 2013 CCP central document is to be understood as an open-ended mission, then the Belt and Road marks the most tangible material manifestation of this immaterial dream. Tied to this is the leadership of President Xi and the distinctive, confident brand with which he has sought to communicate China's place in the world both at home and abroad. One of Xi's most prominent responsibilities during his term as Vice President was oversight of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Under the same theme of internal and external reinforcement discussed above, Xi's communication was as much aimed towards the people of the Chinese Republic as it was to the outside world. The conjoining of the CCP's internal rule and the idea of a global China order was made even more inseparable when China removed the presidential two-term limit, effectively serving Xi the potential to become 'President for life'.

With this in mind, the commitment of President Xi to the Belt and Road, in congruence with his belief in the fulfilment of the 'China dream', is a combination that requires serious contemplation from IR perspectives. Xi's willingness to take his own leadership to new levels is innately tied to his desire for China to embrace new heights of leadership, both symbolically and literally. Xi's tenure has been distinguished from recent Chinese leadership by his uncharacteristic openness about China's coveting of regional and global leadership. As such, Xi made clear to take personal ownership for having launched the Belt and Road during his address to both the 2017 Belt and Road & 2017 World Economic Forums, while the vision document refers to Xi and Premier Li Keqiang as providing "high level guidance and facilitation" (CCP Vision Document 2015). In making clear that, "in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative, China will fully leverage the comparative advantages of its various regions", the Belt and Road represents a significant mark of intent and action, beyond old slogans such as the largely symbolic and rhetorical "harmonious world" of President Hu Jintao (2003-2013). A Chinese academic interviewed for Nordin and Weissmann's (2017) insightful work on this topic, described the Belt and Road as being best understood as "the essence of the realisation of the Chinese dream and the rejuvenation of our nation . . . It is the framework for foreign policy in the decades to come" (Nordin and Weissmann 2017, p. 243).

The CCP's 2015 vision document repeatedly discusses the fulfilment of its aims in the collective terms of "we should", and while it is unambiguous that China is behind the vision itself, it is considerably less clear as to who exactly this collective 'we' refers to. The CCP document states that, "though proposed by China, the Belt and Road Initiative is a common aspiration of all countries along their routes". A contextual and critical reading of this will evoke parallels with the paradigm of 'Centralia' or Tianxia in which the outside world absorbs China's centrality and its global view of rights and relations.

Some commentators have understood President Xi's global communications (such as his 2017 World Economic Forum speech) as putting forth the proposition that China is best placed to fill the leadership void left by the isolationist approach of the Trump administration and political instability across Europe, particularly if world leaders

desire a continuation of the prevailing free-market capitalist order. Ultimately, if the Belt and Road is successfully implemented, then "new Great Power relations will be needed or will emerge by default" (Nordin and Weissmann 2019). In particular, considerable political unease and disagreement is now prevalent across Europe, with the perception being formed that both individual states and the European Union bloc must eventually decide between China and the US as part of an almost 'zero-sum' scenario. The polarised responses to Italy's recent unequivocal support for the Belt and Road Initiative represents just one of many harbingers of this new paradigm.

Eurasia - Battleground for a 'new era' of International Relations?

Within the Belt and Road narrative there exists a dissonance between descriptions of the global and opportunities being made available to all, and the actual practical details of plans and activities conducted via the Belt and Road, which focus almost exclusively on the Eurasian landmass. Emphasising the inextricable web of interactions between history, the present, and the future, this centrality of the Eurasian supercontinent in the Belt and Road imagination reflects the writings of one of the founding fathers of geopolitics over a century ago. Halford Mackinder's 'heartland theory' held that whichever power was able to 'control the geographic core of Eurasia', would be able to rule the world (Mackinder 1904). A growing number of analysts are now beginning to identify the form of future world order through the emergence of a converged Eurasia.

Comments made in 2019 by Russia's President Putin, referring to his belief that liberalism had "become obsolete" (Cheung 2019: BBC News), emphasised the global ideological space that has gradually been revealing itself in geopolitical discourse and engagements. According to Macaes (2018, p. 2), "what took observers by surprise was not that the Eurasian supercontinent emerged from the Cold War as an increasingly integrated space, but that it became so not according to a Western model, but rather as the stage for many different and conflicting political ideas". Whether the Tianxian system is capable of outflanking competing ideologies remains to be seen. However, if it is successful on the scale envisioned by Chinese elites, then the direction of hegemony away from the United States towards a more China-centric form of global cooperation will be set in motion.

"The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking.

It cannot be changed without changing our thinking."

Albert Einstein

Chapter V: Conclusion and Future Outlook

The Belt and Road represents the clearest indication yet that the modern Chinese Republic is experimenting with and implicitly acknowledging a new role which it has long coveted - that of a global superpower. Economic growth, extensive trade and intensive development have brought with it a number of opportunities to project itself as having 'arrived' on the world stage, and the Belt and Road now marks the first clear indication that China has not only arrived, but is now shaping the scene of world politics for decades to come.

As the nature of the world, its constituent actors, and functioning of the global political economy continue to evolve in essential characteristics, it logically follows that the tools deployed to understand and explain the international system must be subject to critique. This paper has served to directly and indirectly bring to the surface challenges against established convention, theory, and practice within the field of International Relations. These include notions of power and what can be achieved with different forms of power, the congruity between private capitalist and state nationalist interests and pursuits, the notion of states as highly fractured and complex spaces, and a scrutiny of the somewhat ingrained assumption that because states have benefited from a particular world order they will not seek to impose their own characteristics and principles on global governance.

The way that the Belt and Road is communicated and imagined leaves us with crucial clues as to the intent and purpose with which China is seeking to engage the world via the Belt and Road. The imagery of the Silk Road and China's centrality within that historical narrative, juxtaposed against the modem-day connectivity and integration with China at its core, formulate an arguably intentional reference to China's reclaiming of its 'rightful place' in the world, or in other words a fulfilment of the 'Tianxia world vision'. For China and its distinctive tradition of global engagement, combined with confidence of its place in the world and the status of the external in relation to it, the 'century of humiliation' and period of Westphalian dominance to which it has been subjected perhaps represents a mere 'break' from the more natural order of global affairs to which it is now returning.

What does this mean for the world?

Chinese state elites and strategists have long referred to the centrality of *heping jueqi* or 'peaceful rise' in asserting and communicating China's ascendancy both to its own people and to the wider world. While China has not shown signs of willingness to engage in direct military conflict with its great power rivals, scholars and analysts are increasingly questioning the feasible sustainability of this peaceful rise. If China is able

to impact the very foundations of world order and the core building blocks of conventional international relations in ways which drastically alter the existing international system and rules based order, then it is far from beyond the realms of possibility that the ongoing trade war between the US and China may escalate into a more serious and damaging form of conflict.

If this new 'constellation' driven by the Belt and Road proves to be successful, then those likely to benefit most are the newly integrated megalopolises of Eurasia and to an even greater extent the CCP, given that the ultimate purpose of Chinese foreign policy is a consolidation of domestic strength. Perhaps more crucially in the context at hand, the biggest losers from the development of this new era will be those countries that forego or are excluded from the Belt and Road - most notably the United States. This again emphasises the new expressions of great power and how its manifestation can co-opt and supersede rival powers without the use of force, as discussed in the main body of the paper. The ways in which economic enmeshment can influence geopolitics is particularly profound given the immense size of China's production and purchasing power. Taking the example of Japan and South Korea, despite both states being strong allies of the US, the fact that their largest trading partner is China makes it almost impossible to conceive that either state will shun China for the sake of aligning with the US. This means that the race for power between China and the should be considerably distinguished from the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, with no possibility of the kind of isolated blocs of alliances that were formed by various middle and small powers at that time. If the Belt and Road is successful, then it is likely that new forms of alliances and blocs will emerge in much more interconnected ways, with a greater emphasis on cohesive integration at the expense of individualised state autonomy.

How much is feasible?

It is of crucial importance to note here that this paper should not be interpreted or received as a definitive overview of what the Belt and Road will achieve, nor what the Belt and Road will definitively impact. For much of the potential impact espoused in this paper, it is simply too early to declare the likelihood of its occurrence. Whilst the nature of Trump's isolationist and 'America first' leadership is directly contrasted with the global outlook and leadership of the CCP, the fact remains that new leadership at the end of Trump's tenure is in no way guaranteed to continue with the same global outlook or trajectory of diplomatic behaviour. Also, much of the Belt and Road's success depends upon the extent to which China can pursue its objectives unimpeded. As discussion over China's ambitions grows and states become increasingly wary of the costs associated with large-scale Chinese engagement, it is far from guaranteed that the Belt and Road will proceed as Chinese elites have envisioned. The intended discursive value of this paper should rather be assessed in relation to the analysis and critique of questions that the Belt and Road is asking of the international landscape and its constituent actors. From this perspective, it is clear that conventional norms and assumptions about international relations and world order should be considered far from unshakeable, despite the extent to which they have been normalised and accepted by

the global community. This is of paramount importance for strategists and theorists to consider and will only grow in prominence as new and distinct powers continue to emerge and assert themselves in world politics.

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