

Book Review

Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative

Edited by Xing Li, Palgrave Macmillan
2019, XI, 298 pp., ISBN 978-3-319-92201-0 (e-Book)

Stepan Verkhovets

Kadir Has University, Department of International Relations
20180926008@stu.khas.edu.tr

How should we evaluate China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative? What are the aims of this huge plan? Is China a challenger or a contributor to the current neoliberal system? Are we witnessing the emergence of a 'new world order with Chinese characteristics'? The edited volume of *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative* raises these and similar questions with an aim to attract interest in studying the Chinese project.

Xing Li, professor of the Department of Culture and Global Studies at Aalborg University, Denmark, is the editor of this book. His research interests include the rise of China and consequences of this process for the capitalist world system; Beijing's foreign policy, and particularly China's relations with BRICS countries, and the political economy of China as a whole.

The edited volume of Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative brings together nine scholars of international relations and international political economy to analyze the effects of the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative on the global political, economic, and socio-cultural system. The volume consists of eleven chapters where the first one is an introduction to the book written by Xing Li. Other chapters cover the main debate questions ranging from how China seeks to facilitate the development of its inland regions through the initiative to how China challenges Japanese domination in East and South East Asia regarding investments. In the last chapter, Xing Li and Paulo Duarte conclude the volume.

In the first chapter, the editor introduces the subject to the reader. Despite different opinions towards the OBOR around the world, Li personally sees the initiative as "an inherent part of the continuous expansion of the capitalist world system driven by the endless capital accumulation" (p. 17). Li argues that the OBOR initiative will inevitably affect the balance of power in the current system. Moreover, China's model of development becomes more attractive for developing

countries. In his opinion, the success of Beijing was a result of good governance rather than the implementation of neoliberal policies. In the next chapter, Xing Li provides three arguments about the rise of China and the OBOR. Firstly, China is transforming its global role from rule-follower to rule-setter. Secondly, the OBOR initiative is an attempt to potentially make China the new world hegemony by creating an alternative 'historical bloc' with Chinese material and ideological leadership. Thirdly, Li claims that China can be characterized either as a victim or a core country of the current neoliberal system depending on where one looks at it.

In the third chapter, Anastas Vangeli argues that nowadays Western countries are not able to promote their norms due to their domestic problems. As a result, China offers an alternative development model to the participating countries of the OBOR initiative. Vangeli calls this development model the 'China Model'. It includes both neoliberalization and political elites' leading role in the development process. At the same time, Vangeli claims that the current situation demonstrates that China's activities are "neither strengthening the hegemonic order nor subverting it" (p. 82). In chapter 4, Feng Yuan underlines that in recent years China has started a deep integration process with Asian countries through the creation of new institutions. At the same time, China is constructing the OBOR initiative to spread its norms and values with a basis of consensus with other states without assuming a hegemonic position. As for bilateral cooperation, until 2016, 37 countries signed Bilateral Swap Agreements with China, which emphasizes the multi-vector character of Beijing's policy.

In chapter 5, Erja Kettunen-Matilainen notes that there is a regional economic imbalance within China between coastal and inland areas. Thus, as the author claims, the OBOR initiative may potentially shift trade flows from China's coastal areas to the Eurasian continent. At the same time, she underlines that the informal regulation of the business in China remains strong. Moreover, nowadays inland regions have a more favorable institutional environment for firms than coastal provinces. This fact might mean a potential shift in economic activity from China's coastal to inland regions. In chapter 6, Paulo Duarte claims that OBOR is a tool to achieve China's economic, political, military, and cultural goals. In other words, the Chinese government seeks to prevent any perceived threat in these spheres. Duarte further argues that China seeks to securitize its sea transportation routes in the Indian Ocean through the so-called 'String of Pearls.' Finally, the author sees China's decision to build its first foreign military base in Djibouti as a "logistics facility likely to serve military operations other than war, and a symbol of the legitimate interest of a power that is concerned with securitizing the energy flows in a region mined by maritime piracy" (p. 159).

In the next chapter, Ritika Passi analyzes how internal domestic economic de-

mands have non-economic consequences for China. Nowadays, the Chinese economy is highly dependent on an open system of trade and investment. In such a need of further globalization, Passi argues, the OBOR provides China with access to new markets and increase the overall volume of exports. According to the author, the OBOR implementation will inevitably make China the center of globalization. China's domestic economic needs lead to the necessity to develop infrastructure in Asia, which leads to non-economic consequences, and makes China an economic, financial, and political center in the region.

In chapter 8, Justin van der Merwe claims that the OBOR initiative seeks to reintegrate Africa and the Middle East into a system of accumulation 'with Chinese characteristics.' However, van der Merwe does not believe that the new system will be different from the Western model. Van der Merwe notes that these regions' role within the OBOR is mainly related to their natural resources and cheap labor. That is to say, the infrastructural investment plans in these regions have a colonial character. The author does not think that China challenges the current Western-led system of accumulation. He believes that BRICS countries and the OBOR serve the interests of the transnational bourgeoisie. The next chapter by Laurids S. Lauridsen focuses on the competition between China and Japan in building infrastructure, particularly high-speed railways (HSR), in Asian countries. Lauridsen argues that even though China has become the main trade partner for many countries in the region, Japan is not currently losing the competition. Nevertheless, Chinese and Japanese economic interests are not mutually exclusive. Thus, Sino-Japanese competition to become the main infrastructure investor in the region does not necessarily result in conflict; cooperation is also possible.

In chapter 10, Dragan Pavličević focuses on the Chinese relationship with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in the context of the OBOR initiative. The author claims that according to the dominant point of view, China currently makes the CEE states highly dependent on its economy. However, by analyzing the current situation, Pavličević argues that Beijing does not have and probably will not have economic, political, security or ideological leverage over the CEE countries in the short and medium terms. Moreover, China seeks to achieve the OBOR initiative's goals by cooperating with the EU, and not challenging Brussels' position in the region. In the final chapter, Xing Li and Paulo Duarte conclude the volume. According to the authors, Chinese economic success was a result of a unique synergy among the state, market, and society. As for the OBOR initiative, it is "nothing more than a powerful and full instrument that China has outlined to project its economic power far beyond its borders" (p. 282). At the same time, China simply seeks to protect its interests abroad and ensure economic growth, political stability, and energy security.

There are many issues that can be discussed with reference to *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative*, as in every chapter, different scholars provide different ideas that attract attention. However, I would like to focus on a particular debate to evaluate the book; that is, to what extent China will change contemporary global structures. It appears to me that it is important to emphasize the nature of China's success in recent decades: the rise of China is evidence of the strengthening of global neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005, pp. 150-151); as China does not challenge the current system. Chinese success was a result of China's participation in the global division of labor. Although Beijing creates new international institutions without coercive mechanisms, it continues to play a major role in global governance through existing post-war organizations. Thus, it does not seem that Beijing seeks to change the existing order. It just aims to take a higher place in the global hierarchy. On that note, the OBOR allows China to focus on high value-added production at home and shift domestic low-cost manufacturing abroad.

Another strong argument that is made in some chapters of the book is that the OBOR initiative was a result of domestic needs in China, and not Beijing's desire to become a dominating power in the world. In my point of view, the slowdown of Chinese economic growth was the main reason behind the OBOR's formulation and implementation. Indeed, since Beijing started active integration to the global economy and global division of labor especially since its entry to the World Trade Organization, China has found itself strongly dependent on further globalization, which is not driven by the West anymore. Thus, China has become a new leading force of globalization through the OBOR. Furthermore, I believe that Beijing seeks to ensure its stable economic growth and does not wish to challenge the position of the USA in the world. In fact, China is not ready to become the world (even regional) center of capital accumulation because of the USA's still strong position in international affairs, its relatively poor population, and the remaining role as the world factory in the international division of labor. However, China has made huge progress in solving these problems during the few last decades. Additionally, China has many internal and external territorial problems, which did not exist in that scale for the previous centers of capital accumulation in the last centuries. Thus, I believe the argument of Xing Li that China will become a new hegemonic power and new center of capital accumulation through the realization of OBOR and promotion of its development model abroad is questionable. To further exemplify this, after the 2008 global economic crisis, China did not step away from participating in American post-war organizations like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. On the contrary, China started to play a bigger role in these institutions' work and did not attempt to reform the system.

Lastly, I believe that China promotes the 'inclusive globalization' idea and 'win-

win' partnership with other countries that take part in the OBOR initiative only because China has a stronger economy than any other participating countries in the project. That is why Beijing promotes the idea of free competition among firms, as Chinese firms usually win permissions to undertake infrastructure projects in the participant countries simply because these countries' domestic firms are not able to compete with Chinese ones. At the same time, in relations with more advanced economies, China continues to implement protectionist policies. Thus, with a deep understanding that the free market is not always beneficial for all, Beijing selectively implements its policy.

All in all, the volume of *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative* is truly fascinating in its ability to unpack China's motives behind the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, and to describe the current effects of this plan on participating countries. Moreover, the book elaborates different opinions on China's domestic gains from the OBOR and its potential consequences for the world. It also raises relevant questions on many dimensions of the OBOR. Since the volume includes eleven chapters by nine different scholars, it allows readers to look at the OBOR from different angles. Thus, the book is a must-read for scholars who are interested in studying the rise of China and the One Belt One Road initiative.

Bio

Stepan Verkhovets is an MA student at Kadir Has University, International Relations Department. His research interests include international political economy, emerging powers, and political economy of development.

References

Harvey, David. 2005. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.