

**Book Review:**Saleh Shahriar<sup>1</sup>

**Li Xing**, ed. 2019. *Mapping China's One Belt One Road Initiative*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-3-319-92200-3.

The emergence of China is a global phenomenon. Understanding China through the lens of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would make us informed and focused. The book, entitled, *Mapping China's One Belt One Road Initiative*, edited by Li Xing, who is the Director of the Research Centre on Development and International Relations at the Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, Denmark, is an innovative, timely and significant contribution to the growing literature on the BRI. The book has been published as a part of Palgrave Macmillan's *International Political Economy Series* which aims to track the development of the international political economy in both analysis and structure over the last three decades. Notably, Timothy M. Shaw, Emeritus Professor at the University of London has been working as editor of the series.

The aim of the book is to “join on the global discussions on China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) focusing on the implications and impact of this initiative on China, its neighbors, the extended regions and the world at large” (p.17). This aim has been met through the book's theoretical discussions and analytic contributions. On the basis of the facts now available, it is clear that the goal of China through the BRI is to promote connectivity in five key areas: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, financial cooperation and people-to-people contacts (Shahriar, Kea & Qian, 2019). The book provides an authentic account of the diverse implications of the BRI and its probable, multiple impacts on the neighboring countries located in the South-Eastern, Southern, and Central Asian, African and Middle Eastern regions. Ang (2019) observes that the BRI is an ‘ambitious vision to expand Beijing's investment and trade ties with some 65 other countries that collectively cover two-thirds of the world's population’. The global influence of China through the BRI is, no doubt, increasing day by day, since the BRI is regarded as a ‘China's new global strategy’ (Zhao, 2019).

At present, the BRI involves about 100 countries spanning Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania, Central and Eastern Europe, West Asia, and North Africa, over 900

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projects, and close to US\$1 trillion as of mid-2018 (Yuan, 2019). Moreover, China's economic growth slowed down in the last few decades. The average annual GDP growth rate was an impressive 9.9 percent from 1979 through 2010. But China's economic growth slowed from 10.6 percent in Year 2010 to 6.6 percent in 2018 (Chen, Chen & Dondeti, 2019). As a result, the Chinese leadership is looking for new sources to sustain economic growth for an attempted transition from age-old export-oriented growth to a new Chinese model based on consumption and foreign investment (p. 29). In this context, the book comprises of eleven chapters. There are two opening chapters contributed by the editor, Li Xiang. These chapters provide the research background, questions and outline of the book and then examines the realists, idealist, world systems, dependency and New Gramscian theories with a view to focusing on the global debate between different schools of international relations and political economy. The chapters mention some pertinent questions often raised in the minds of the Western leaders: "What are China's strategic objectives for the OBOR?", "Are there any hidden Chinese agendas?", "How will China benefit from the OBOR?" "Will the OBOR be another repetition of a historical colonial pattern in the twenty-first century?" "Will Chinese cheap loans be payment for submitting to China's leadership and hegemon?" (p.7). Outlining the emergence of a new world order with the multi-dimensional nature of the BRI, it is strongly argued that driven by the policy of pragmatism, China has transformed itself from a rule-follower to a rule-make or rule-setter.

Chapter three applies the theory of diffusion to the analysis of the BRI. It argues that the BRI is an interactive and fascinating process influenced by the norms, ideas, principles and ground realities of the Chinese internal policy makers, public intellectuals as well as the external actors. The BRI is, in fact, a way to advance economic globalization through the state-led cooperation.

Chapters four and five offer sharp insights about the design of China's 'multilayered institutionalism', a notion describing a combination of China's bilateral partnership networks and multilateral relationships. The BRI is often seen as an attempt to build a set of new institutional arrangements such as the Silk Road Economic Belt, maritime Silk Road, Silk Road Fund, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, free trade zones, and special economic zones. China has preferential trade agreement with both ASEAN and Asian Pacific counties. The most important development is the transboundary projects under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. In this way, China is regionally and internationally integrated by means of a new institutional settings and multi-scaler governance of

international trade. These institutional set-ups would eventually help China achieve its “economic, political, military and cultural objectives in this new century” (p143). The geopolitical and strategic narratives with regard to the securitization of the land and maritime routes along the BRI are detailed in Chapter six; whereas the economic and non-economic motivations constitute the subject of Chapter seven. It is shown that connectivity with neighbors and the rest of the world stands out as the main motivation behind the BRI. The next Chapter demonstrates how China is making efforts to get connected and integration with Africa and Middle East by the Chinese system of accumulation. State-led enterprises are the core vehicles for China’s network capitalism. Chapter nine presents a case study of the Chinese connectivity by high-speed railway diplomacy in Thailand. The relationships between China and Central and Eastern Europe have been investigated in Chapter ten with special reference to 16+1 framework in the context of the BRI. The chapter shows that engagement between China and Eastern European is rapidly deepening in the areas of trade and economic fields; but lacks soft power capabilities in the region.

The closing chapter titled, Conclusion: The One Belt One Road in the Politics of Fear and Hope, summarizes the main theme of the book. It demonstrates as to why China’s global rise would be inevitable, despite the existence of ‘jealousy, admiration, anxiety, worry, and even resentment.’(p.11). The two authors, Li Xing and Paulo Duarte, in this chapter, come to the conclusion that China is likely to emerge again, analogous to the Middle Kingdom, becoming the *global mega hub* due to China’s historical consistency, peaceful development gesturing, innovation, pragmatism and cooperative relationships with other countries. They successfully have uncovered the limitations of the Western bifocal perceptions, such as the China Opportunity vs China Threat paradigm. The authors highlight the problems and issues regarding the implementation of BRI. The conclusion offers an optimistic view, in the following words, “China’s emergence as an alternative aid donor, investor, and economic partner seems to be one of the major power sources of attraction for other developing states” (p.282). There is an index (pp.291-298) included at the end of the volume.

The book makes a number of notable contributions to the existing literature. First, it clearly maps out the economic, social, cultural and geopolitical environments and implications regarding the BRI countries and regions. Secondly, it evaluates, objectively and systematically, the opportunities, issues and constraints relating to the BRI. Third, it explores the currents myths, illusions, and over-simplified ideas circulated by the anti-Chinese propaganda groups and vested

interests. The key arguments put forwarded are substantiated by facts and figures. Also, the contributors in the various chapters have made a sound linkage between theoretical propositions and empirical analyses of the cases. The volume has, however, a weakness that is- the absence of the South Asian perspective on the BRI. Note that China has a long economic and historic ties with the South Asian neighbors; such as, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan. Importantly, India opposes the BRI as it goes through the disputed territory of Kashmir between India and Pakistan. For instance, Blah (2018) argues that the expanding role of Beijing ; especially in South Asia, has made India apprehensive. Moreover, India and Pakistan are nuclear armed neighbors, being antagonistic to each other. India has been geo-strategically allied with the United States of America. Furthermore, there is an apprehension that the rise of China might erode the US hegemony (Zhao 2017). China is building deep sea-ports in Pakistan's Gwadar. The port in Gwadar is of enormous economic and strategic significance to China (Ali 2018). China has agreement to invest a sum of US\$62 billion in Pakistan's various sectors under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Despite the above-mentioned quibble, the book is, however, well-researched, thoughtful, and a good read. Each chapter is impressively written, convincingly argued and shrewdly insightful. Students of political science, economics, international relations, and communications and development studies would find the volume, useful and a good reference work.

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