

Introduction

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), is a global development framework launched by the Chinese government in 2013. Conceptually inspired by the ancient Silk Road (a network of trade routes extending from East Asia to Europe) the BRI too, according to its promoters, aims at bringing prosperity to the contemporary world through connectivity *lato sensu*. In practice, it offers a framework through which China partners with governments and international organisations across the world in a wide array of development projects, mostly (although not only) as a source of investments and commercial loans. The numerous activities included under the BRI umbrella have proved to be highly diverse in scope, ranging from trade promotion to cultural and people-to-people exchanges, to healthcare (Cao 2020). In terms of both the number and monetary value of projects, it appears to be mainly focused on the development of infrastructure, and especially connectivity (roads, ports, railways, information and communication technology) and energy infrastructure (power plants, pipelines, etc.) (Nedopil 2021). Aiming at strengthening China's influence in international relations from both a political and an economic standpoint, the BRI has emerged as the cornerstone of its grand strategy under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. While in recent years Beijing unveiled three new initiatives¹ – the Global

Data Security Initiative (GDSI), which was launched in 2020; the Global Development Initiative (GDI) (2021); and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) (2022) – the BRI appears to have remained the basis for every subsequent engagement. As of January 2023, 32 international organisations and 151 countries had joined the BRI (accounting for about 75% of the world's population and more than half of the world's GDP²), which stands as proof of its breadth and relevance. In spite of this, or perhaps because of such unprecedented extensiveness in scope and space, a decade after its inception the BRI framework still remains somewhat loosely defined in theory and considerably diverse in its practice (Zeng 2019; de L.T. Oliveira et al. 2020; Liu, Schindler and Liu 2020; Safina, Ramondetti and Governa 2023).

Ever since its launch, the BRI has been widely researched, thus producing thousands of reports by government agencies and independent think-tanks, as well as a great deal of academic publications that have addressed specific aspects through the lens of various disciplines. Main themes have included China's historical, political, and economic motivations (Wang 2016; Griffiths 2017; Yu 2017; Clarke 2018a; Dunford and Liu 2019; Xing 2019; Holt 2020; Zou et al. 2022); the BRI's international dimension (Berlie 2020; Joshua 2020; Sheng 2023; Zhang, Tang and Tian 2023), including its actual or potential impact on specific regions (Garlick 2020; Gerstl and Wallenböck 2021; Ploberger, Ngampamuan and Song 2022; Züfle 2023; Sharma 2023), and perceptions of the BRI in the US (Chance 2016; Sutter 2023), the EU (Ntousas and Minas 2021; Feas and Steinberg 2023), and Russia (Zemánek 2020; Pieper 2022; Sheng 2023). To a lesser extent, scholars have investigated perceptions of the BRI across Africa and the Asia-Pacific region (Andornino and Prodi 2017; Cheng, Song and Huang 2018; Zhang, Alon and Lattemann 2018; Carrai, Defraigne and Wouters 2020; Afzaal 2023). It would be difficult, if not impossible, to offer an account of such an enormous body of literature. The aim of this introduction is not to present the state of the art of scholarship on the BRI but rather to address the following points: first, what the contribution of this Special Issue is; second, the methodologies adopted; and third, the main themes that have emerged.

International actors have been dealing with the opportunities and challenges presented by the BRI in different ways. Some countries, such as the US (Rosenberg 2022), have rejected it altogether to protect their interests. Others, such as Turkey (Chaziza 2021) and Japan,³ have taken the lead on alternative strategies for economic partnerships or integration. India has both opposed the BRI to safeguard its interests⁴ and promoted alternative integration initiatives⁵. Finally, the majority of states has joined the BRI to extract political and economic benefits. This Special Issue focuses on perceptions, evaluations, and reactions to the BRI among non-Chinese stakeholders, i.e. countries/regions (Fulton 2020) whose involvement in the same has been studied by scholars to a lesser extent. The aim is to evaluate where specific groups of countries or geopolitical regions stand vis-à-vis the China-led initiative, analysing their response to the BRI, the

strategies they adopted (as well as underlying interests and conflicts) and their potential consequences. Research questions include (but are not limited to) the following: To what extent have these countries/regions played a role in shaping the BRI? Were they able to set their own agendas, or did they become an arena for great powers (i.e. the US and Russia) to challenge China's assertiveness? What internal forces contributed to shaping their policies (e.g. the government, public opinion, or the private sector)? To what extent are BRI partners able to maintain their agency? While previous scholarship explored African and Asian stakeholders' involvement in the BRI, the need to account for the most recent developments at the national, regional, and international levels justifies fresh investigation. More specifically, this Special Issue brings together regions and countries spanning from Mediterranean Africa to South Asia, many of which are among those under-investigated.

The multifaceted nature of the BRI as a topic and the variety of partner countries considered call for different methodological approaches: in terms of academic disciplines, the articles in this Special Issue draw on both history and international relations. On the one hand, the BRI provides a way for China to build partnerships by capitalising, both politically and culturally, on long-term relations that date back to the earlier Communist or Nationalist periods, or even the Imperial era. On the other hand, the BRI serves as a means for China to engage with new partners, i.e. countries with which it established bilateral relations more recently or that until not long ago had been comparatively less critical to Chinese interests. In light of this, a historical approach was necessary to contextualise the BRI as it stands today within the *longue durée* of China's interactions with the selected countries and regions, highlighting the relevance of the past in shaping current partnerships (or lack thereof). The partnerships forged under the BRI framework have been projected, understood, and criticised first and foremost as reflecting Beijing's novel approach to international development finance and foreign policy, hence the need for approaching the topic from an international relations angle, which can help gauge the nature and aims of the initiative and its possible economic and political impact on regional contexts. The BRI is, as already mentioned, complex, diverse, and extensive: it is characterised for being multi-sector, multi-level, and multi-process, and designed to unfold across continents through land and sea routes, including those states that are critical to maintaining regional balances, such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt – where other great powers' interests, besides China's, are at stake (e.g. Russia's and the US'). Accordingly, the Chinese initiative necessarily intertwines with strategic issues of energy security, such as conflict prevention and resolution, and counterterrorism (Clarke 2018b), to name a few, and, more generally, with the reset of global geopolitical order.

This Special Issue considers seven regions: Mediterranean Africa (Libya and Egypt); the Red Sea (both coasts); the Mashreq (Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq); Turkey and the Caucasus; the Arab/Persian Gulf (Arab monarchies and Iran); Central

Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); and South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka).

Amjed Rasheed takes Egypt and Algeria as a case study. Through a careful historical analysis, his paper explains why both countries view the Beijing Consensus as a useful and trustworthy model to pursue growth while retaining sovereignty. Federico Donelli focuses on the reshuffle of the security setup in the Red Sea region to take stock of the implications that the BRI's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) could have on regional and international balances. Drawing on the case-study of Djibouti, the author argues that the ongoing securitisation process makes the Red Sea arena a litmus test for current and future global power balances. Arturo Marzano discusses the long-term viability of the BRI in the Mashreq, and in Israel in particular. He shows that the initiative faces three major challenges: the security risk posed by complex internal situations in several countries; the lack of regional cooperation; and the US' unwillingness to let China play a leading role in the region. Carlo Frappi's article dissects the interactions between the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) spanning from Central Asia to the Turkey-EU border and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), a branch of the BRI. By analysing these two large infrastructure projects unfolding in the Caucasus region, this article unpacks the dynamics of Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation amidst infrastructure politics. In his analysis of the impact of the BRI in the Persian Gulf, Jacopo Scita finds that the Chinese initiative has proved an element of continuity rather than disruption in Sino-Gulf relations. Importantly, the BRI does not seem to represent a driver for great power competition in the region because it has not fostered direct economic-driven competition between China and the US in the Gulf. While the infrastructure-intensive nature of the BRI has prompted much scholarship, including in this Special Issue, to focus on so-called *mega-projects*, Giulia Sciorati looks at a well-known but comparatively under-investigated goal of the BRI: the promotion of people-to-people relations. Drawing on the case of Central Asia, the article contends that Chinese civil societies have relied on an extensive diversification of activities to maximise the chances of presenting a favourable image of China, thus offering a critique of the argument that China's state-directed civil societies are less effective in generating soft power than states where civil societies operate freely. Lastly, Silvia Tieri writes on the approach to BRI deals pursued by Bangladesh, a BRI partner that has been discussed relatively less compared to fellow nation-states from the Indian subcontinent. This article argues that, as a small state, and differently from other South Asian BRI members, Bangladesh has proved to be cautious and confident in navigating the opportunity and challenges of Chinese development finance, and well versed at exploiting the China-India rivalry in the region to its own advantage.

This Special Issue draws attention to three themes, some of which are addressed by more than one article in connection to a specific region, thus working as a *fil rouge* throughout the issue. These are the US-China competition; the soft-power component

of the BRI; and intra-region partnerships as a counterweight to China's influence. By the latter we mean the existence of regional partnerships aimed at counterbalancing a Chinese embrace perceived by BRI partners that are *small countries* as potentially overwhelming, a phenomenon common to many of the regions considered in this Special Issue. This is, for example, the case of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus region (analysed in this issue by Frappi) and Bangladesh and India in South Asia (considered in Tieri's article). A second theme is the relevance of soft power as one among the tools used by China within the BRI framework in order to strengthen its economic and political role, as the case of Central Asia (considered in Sciorati's article) clearly exemplifies. Last but not least, while being region-specific, all papers deal with the issue of US-China rivalry in connection to the BRI. Indeed, the competition between the two superpowers is part of the BRI equation regardless of the region/country considered and in some cases – like Israel's, examined by Marzano – has emerged as a crucial factor to gauge the BRI's likelihood of success. US-China competition is also closely linked to any understanding of the nature of the BRI from the point of view of global politics, whose perspective informs Donelli's and Scita's articles. While there is no doubt that the BRI, however loosely defined, serves China to actively engage states and markets across the world, analysts have provided contrasting interpretations regarding its larger scope. In this sense, narratives of the BRI as a foreign policy tool and a political-economic project have reflected contrasting perceptions of China's role as a global, non-Western power within a changing world order. The beginning of the 21st century was widely welcomed as the dawn of the *Asian century*, due to a large extent (although not only) to China's achieved records in terms of economic and military growth, which enabled Beijing to pursue a more assertive approach to international relations and disputes (Thayer 2011; He and Feng 2012; Reilly 2012; Mastro 2014; Liao 2016; Macikenaite 2020; Miller 2022). On the one hand, commentators not just from China but from the Global South in general did not shy away from saluting the Chinese rise as a desirable alternative to Western centrality, partly echoing China's own narrative(s) (Dunford and Liu 2019), but also exposing the limits of the neoliberal Western model, including in the field of foreign aid (Mawdsley 2012a; Mawdsley 2012b; Johnston and Rudyak 2017), and welcoming the arrival of the Asian superpower to the global stage with hope and optimism (Liu and Dunford 2016; Cheney 2022; Guo 2023), like in the case of Egypt and Algeria examined by Rasheed. China appeared to be engaged in a restructuring of great power balances also by means of development finance, specifically by leading the front of the non-traditional donors (Chajdas 2018; Dunford 2020) and advancing the proposition of an alternative paradigm that is allegedly different from the one established by traditional donors and aimed at promoting an *inclusive* form of growth and globalisation (Liu, Dunford and Gao 2018; Jones 2020; Dole et al. 2021; Palit and Bhogal 2022; Tekdal 2022; Alves, Gong and Li 2023). On the other hand, those who are set to lose from the change – namely traditional powers and first and foremost

global hegemon America – have been looking at China with anxiety. The condemnation of China as an unaccountable and revisionist power, thus a threat, has been widely voiced from the Global North (Broomfield 2003; Pavličević 2018; Pavličević 2022; Peters et al. 2022; Wallis et al. 2022), and most vocally by American hawks, like US President Donald Trump (Liu and Woo 2018; Kubo 2019; Medeiros 2019; Yuan and Fu 2020; Coulson 2022; Parmar and Furse 2023; Shah 2023); but from the South too, for example by India – also a hegemon, within its own region (Liu 2023; Pant and Mann 2023, Surendra Kumar 2023), an aspect addressed in Tieri's article on Bangladesh. Also, Southern and grassroots perspectives rooted in the located-ness of Chinese partnerships have highlighted the drawbacks of doing business or development the Beijing way, denouncing issues of dispossession (Cai 2022; Mackenzie et al. 2022) and sustainability, including financial (Brautigam 2020; DeBoom 2020; Rosendal Ebbesen 2022) and environmental sustainability (Tracy et al. 2017; WWF 2017; Ascensão et al. 2018; WWF 2018; Han et al. 2020; Coenen et al. 2021; Shi et al. 2023); agency and fungibility (Jiang 2023; Yildirim and Yilmaz 2023); and even neo-imperialist tendencies. Within this debate, as the current linchpin of Beijing's global engagement, the BRI has found for itself an *avatar* in each of these narratives of contemporary China. Thus, the BRI has been understood as a non-Western-led approach to international relations, a boon to fill developing countries' infrastructure gap and need for investments (Chen 2023; Della Posta 2023; Sun and Fan 2023; Zhang 2023); as a policy to repair a crisis in China's domestic economy, namely overaccumulation and economic slowdown (Hong 2016; Sum 2019; Apostolopoulou 2021; Amineh 2022); as a way to accumulate goodwill internationally (Liu, Wang and Ning 2023) while sheltering revanchist aspirations (Freyman 2021; Omrani 2022; Cao and Qiaoan 2023); or, perhaps not so simplistically after all, as nothing really new in the game of international relations, but good old foreign aid politics, rebranded.

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Notes:

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