

Global infrastructure and connectivity: the contending Chinese and Western initiatives

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Abstract :

The rivalry between Great powers for gaining access to markets and to spheres of influence took the form, lately, of competing connectivity and infrastructures geopolitical projects, in the framework of rising needs in infrastructure in the emerging and developing economies.

In response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, known as the "New Silk Road", issued in 2013, the Western great powers unveiled opposite and concurrent initiatives, such as the United States' Build Back Better World (B3W), the European Union' Global Gateway, the Indian-Japanese initiative for Eastern Africa and the British initiative Clean Green.

Key words : Great powers' rivalry, China's Belt & Road Initiative, US' Build Back Better World (B3W), European Union' Global Gateway.

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1. Introduction

The World Bank estimates that to achieve the goals of climate and environmental protection, universal access to energy, water and sanitation, greater mobility and improved food security, the world must invest around 1,3 trillion euro per year in infrastructure. According to G20 estimates, the global infrastructure investment deficit will reach 13 trillion euro by 2040. According to World Bank research, every 10% increase in infrastructure provision increases economic output by approximately 1% in the long term.¹

Rarely in World history there were so many simultaneous works in so many countries: big dams, continental ways, rapid train lines, submarine cables, ports, airports, logistic platforms, tubes, fiber, satellites launch and cyber-space.²

Against this backdrop, the Great Powers proposed huge projects to fill the infrastructure gap and in the same time fulfilling their aspirations and their interests of gaining access to markets and achieving spheres of influence. The problematic of this article is: can be consider the infrastructure and connectivity initiatives of China, the United States, Japan, the European Union, India and Britain as a new chapter of the competition and rivalry between Great powers in the 21st Century?

Our hypotheses are that Great powers rivalry in a world characterized by a multipolar anarchy take nowadays the form of competition on resources and markets, global infrastructure projects and contending spheres of political influence.

In this article, we have used two theoretical frameworks to understand how the Great powers compete through connectivity and infrastructure projects: the first theory is Realism and according to some of the most important realist thinkers, as Edward H. CARR and Hans MORGENTHAU, States which are the paramount actors in International relations compete and fight for power, influence, national security and National interest in a context of anarchy. The second theory, that will help us to decipher Great powers' policies is "constructivism", through which we can explain foreign policy by the ideas and values of the individual. Both China and the Western powers portray their projects as materialization of their world vision: the Consensus of Beijing (aid without condition, non-interference in internal affairs, respect of sovereignty) and the Consensus of Washington (moral values of human rights, democracy and openness).

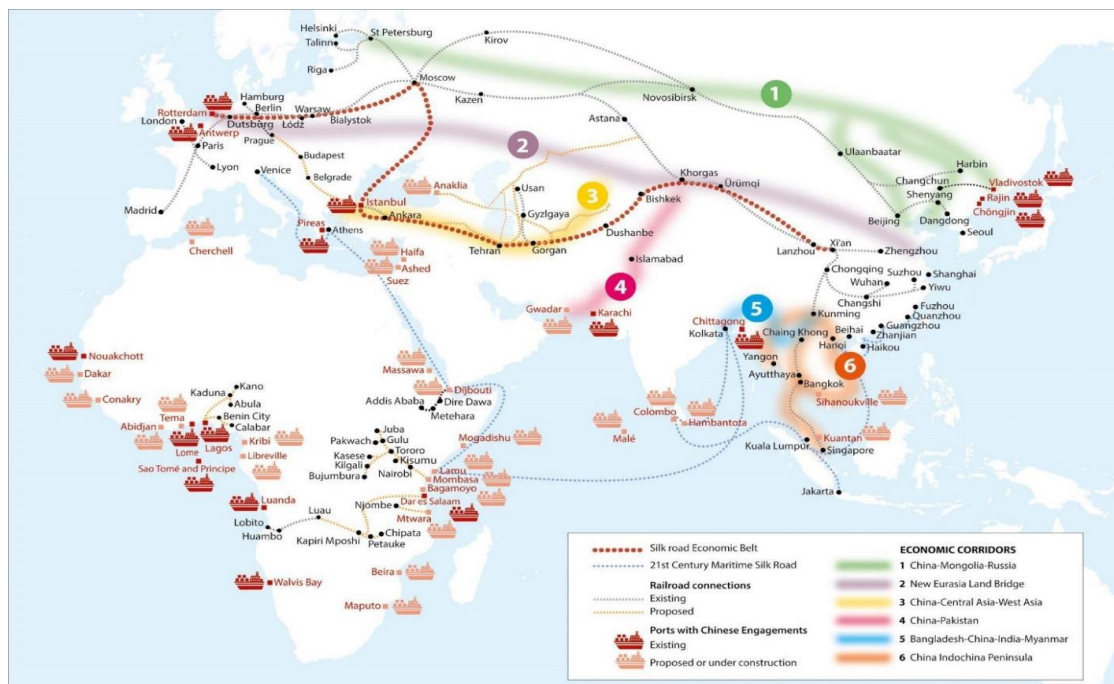
2. China's Belt & Road Initiative

2.1. The "New Silk Road" according to China

The Chinese President XI Jinping raised the initiative of building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road during visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013. According to China, it is an initiative for peaceful development and economic cooperation, rather than a geopolitical or military alliance.³ The Belt and Road Initiative focuses on policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closed people-to-people ties.

Belt and Road Initiative is a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program which aims at infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road. According to the official outline for the Belt and Road Initiative issued on March

28, 2015, by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, this initiative aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries and set up connectivity networks and realize development.⁴



Map 1: The New Silk Road

Source: OECD, China's Belt and Road Initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape, 2018.

The Silk Road Economic Belt is spanning six development “corridors” and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road connects China to Southeast Asia, India, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, Egypt and Europe, encompassing the South China sea, strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. A Polar Silk Road was unveiled on January 26, 2018.

According to the official outline, the Belt and Road Initiative is based on five cooperation priorities: policy coordination; facilities connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration and people-to-people bonds. People-to-People ties are the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road. This dimension encompasses diverse forms of cultural exchanges (arts festivals, film festivals, music festivals, book fairs, and exhibitions), education and training (recognition of higher education degrees, scholarships in China, Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms), tourism (mutual visa exemption agreements, streamline visa application procedures), health and medicine and efforts in disaster relief, assistance and poverty alleviation.

According to China, Belt and Road is meant for mutual benefits and win-win outcome. China supports developing countries such as those in Asia, Africa and Latin America to invest more in infrastructure. China includes the provision of aid in poverty reduction, agriculture, education, health, environmental protection and other areas into the joint efforts to build the Belt and Road and facilitates the transfer of scientific and technological innovations.

The Belt and Road Initiative reflects the international community demand for a global governance system that is fair, egalitarian, open and inclusive. All countries should respect each other's sovereignty, dignity, territorial integrity, development path, social systems and core interests, and accommodate each other's major concerns.

The overseeing body of the Belt and Road Initiative is the Office of Leading Group on promoting the implementation of Belt and Road Initiatives under the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). The State International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDCA), unveiled on April 18, 2018, is responsible for strategic guidelines and policies on foreign aid.⁵

After the Covid-19 pandemic, China proposed in the year 2020 the "Health Silk Road", using the health diplomacy as an asset through gifts of vaccines and medical equipment to foreign countries.

2.2. The initiative in the praxis:

China hosted the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 and in April 2019 in Beijing.

Belt & Road countries have made concerted efforts to build infrastructure framework centered on railways, roads, shipping, aviation, pipelines and integrated space information networks. Progress has been made in the construction of corridors to connect Asia with Europe: the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula corridor, the China-Pakistan corridor and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor.

China actively engages in substantive coordination and cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative with other participating countries, fully utilizing existing multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as: G20, APEC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Asia-Europe Meeting, Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Conference on interaction and confidence-building measures in Asia, China-ASEAN cooperation mechanism, Lancang-Mekong cooperation, Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation, Greater Tumen Initiative, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China-Arab states Cooperation Forum, China-CELAC Forum, China-CEEC 16+1 mechanism, China-Pacific Islands countries economic development and cooperation forum, the World Economic Forum and Boao Forum for Asia.⁶

Since opening in 2016, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has played a role of increasing importance in the international multilateral development system. In November 2014, the Chinese government pledged 40 billion USD to establish a Silk Road Fund and in May 2017, it announced an additional 100 billion RMB contribution to the fund. In 2017, the Chinese government established the Public-Private Partnership mechanism for the Belt and Road.

Since 2019, Chinese state-led Belt and Road lending volumes have been in decline. The Belt and Road now places increasing emphasis on "high quality investment", including through use of project finance, risk mitigation tools and green finance. As of March 2020, 138 countries joined the Belt and Road Initiative by signing a Memorandum of Understanding.⁷

Since May 2018, the World Bank Group has produced a series of 19 background papers and one summary report that provide independent analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative links to trade, investment, debt, procurement, environment, poverty reduction and infrastructure. An official list of participating countries does not yet exist.

For the 70 “corridor economies” (excluding China), projects in all sectors that are already executed, in implementation, or planned are estimated to amount to 575 billion USD. The Belt and Road Initiative presents risks common to many major infrastructure projects: debt risks, governance risks (corruption and procurement), stranded infrastructure, environmental risks and social risks.⁸

The loans of the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China went down from 75 billion USD to 4 billion USD between 2016 and 2019. China is aware of the financial and political risks of heavy debt.⁹

The countries who are part of the Chinese initiative:¹⁰

In Asia-Pacific: Afghanistan (2013), Bangladesh (2019), Brunei (2018), Cambodia (2013), East Timor (2017), Fiji (2018), Indonesia (2015), Kazakhstan (2015), Kiribati (2020), Kyrgyzstan (2013), Laos (2018), Malaysia (2017), Maldives (2017), Micronesia (2018), Mongolia (2013), Myanmar (2016), Nepal (2017), New Zealand (2017), Pakistan (2013), Papua New Guinea (2016), Philippines (2017), Samoa (2018), Singapore (2018), Solomon (2019), South Korea (2018), Sri Lanka (2017), Tajikistan (2018), Thailand (2014), Tonga (2018), Uzbekistan (2015), Vanuatu (2018), Vietnam (2017).

In Europe: Albania (2017), Armenia (2015), Azerbaijan (2015), Belarus (2013), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017), Bulgaria (2015), Croatia (2017), Cyprus (2019), Czech Republic (2015), Estonia (2017), Georgia (2016), Greece (2018), Hungary (2015), Italy (2019), Latvia (2016), Lithuania (2017), Luxembourg (2019), Macedonia (2013), Malta (2018), Moldova (2013), Montenegro (2017), Poland (2015), Portugal (2018), Romania (2015), Serbia (2015), Slovakia (2015), Slovenia (2017), Ukraine (2017).

In Middle East and North Africa: Algeria (2018), Bahrain (2018), Egypt (2016), Iran (2018), Iraq (2015), Kuwait (2018), Lebanon (2017), Libya (2018), Mauritania (2018), Morocco (2017), Oman (2018), Qatar (2019), Saudi Arabia (2018), Sudan (2018), Tunisia (2018), Turkey (2015), United Arab Emirates (2018), Yemen (2017).

In Sub-Saharan Africa: Angola (2018), Burundi (2018), Cameroon (2015), Cape Verde (2018), Chad (2018), Democratic Republic of Congo (2021), Djibouti (2018), Equatorial Guinea (2019), Ethiopia (2018), Gabon (2018), Gambia (2018), Ghana (2018), Guinea (2018), Cote d'Ivoire (2017), Kenya (2017), Lesotho (2019), Liberia (2019), Madagascar (2017), Mali (2019), Mozambique (2018), Namibia (2018), Nigeria (2018), Rwanda (2018), Senegal (2018), Seychelles (2018), Sierra Leone (2018), Somalia (2015), South Africa (2015), South Sudan (2018), Tanzania (2018), Togo (2018), Uganda (2018), Zambia (2018), Zimbabwe (2018).

In the Americas: Antigua and Barbuda (2018), Barbados (2019), Bolivia (2018), Chile (2018), Costa-Rica (2018), Cuba (2019), Ecuador (2018), El Salvador (2018), Grenada (2018), Guyana (2018), Jamaica (2019), Panama (2017), Peru

(2019), Suriname (2018), Trinidad and Tobago (2018), Uruguay (2018), Venezuela (2018).

2.3. The Chinese initiative in a geopolitical perspective:

China has both geopolitical and economic motivations behind the initiative. XI Jinping has promoted a vision of a more assertive China. There are three main motivations for the Belt and Road Initiative: rivalry with the United States (creating more secure trade routes for China), build economic and political influence for China, alternative markets for China's vast state-owned companies, Chinese efforts to stimulate economies of the country's central provinces.

Launched in 2013, the Chinese OBOR initiative aims to modernize and build land (roads, railways, gas and oil pipelines) and sea corridors in more than sixty countries. The objective of Beijing is to secure its natural resources and raw materials supplies, to secure its exports and to foster economic growth.¹¹ Among the motivations for the Belt and Road Initiative: the rivalry with the United States, building economic and political influence for China, and alternative markets for China's vast state-owned companies. China wants also to stimulate economies of the country's western provinces (Xinjiang, Tibet).

The assertiveness of China during the two last decades is a source of preoccupation for its Asian neighbors and for the industrialized countries who must compete and confront un new economic power with a non-democratic political system and a new alternative development model.

The Belt and Road Initiative has stoked opposition. Some countries take on large amounts of debt to fund infrastructure upgrades. Some Belt and Road investments have involved opaque bidding processes and required the use of Chinese firms.¹²

The Belt and Road Initiative is largely treated with suspicion in the United States and its major allies, characterized in terms of debt trap diplomacy, opaque enterprise and as a threat to Western interests. This is part of a wider issue of the opaque nature of the Belt and Road and the loans on which it is built.

The initiative is seen in the West as "Debt-trap diplomacy": China uses the Belt and Road, funding major infrastructure projects in developing nations with unsustainable loans. The Hambantota Port was handed to China on a 99-year lease in 2017, Sri Lanka was unable to service the Chinese loans which funded the project.¹³

China became a central actor of the African development. Africa became an asset for the internationalization of Chinese public and private companies. Some African civil society activists criticize China for the non-respect of environmental and social standards and for the weak impetus of China's presence on local economies.¹⁴ China wants to control the maritime ways to Europe and Africa.¹⁵

3- The Western alternative initiatives.

The Western great powers (United States, European Union, Japan, Britain) decided to adopt their own infrastructure and connectivity initiatives to counter and contain China's assertiveness.

3.1. Japan-India initiatives:

India and Japan have decided to jointly foray into infrastructure development in other countries (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Southeast Asia, African countries), with a focus on social welfare.

The AAGC (Asia-Africa Growth Corridor) was announced on 23 May 2017 at the 52nd African Development Bank meeting in India by Narendra MODI. The vision aims to connect Asia and Africa and develop Africa's capabilities. It is based on four major pillars: development and cooperation projects; quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity; enhancing capacities and skills; people-to-people partnership.¹⁶

The October 2018 MODI-ABE Summit in Tokyo made clear that the two countries now have a similar outlook on projects with a greater focus on India's neighborhood.

Indian companies see the AAGC as a source of alternative funding, the Japanese companies are more focused on expanding trade and capacity building than investment for large projects.¹⁷

The AAGC's aim is to provide greater funding for African development in a way that is more conscious of debt servicing obligations, climate issues and transparency.

AAGC include human resource training, setting up pan Africa E-network, developing capacities to sustain infrastructure, greenfield projects, investment opportunities, renewable energy, power grids, agriculture and agro processing, disaster management, joint venture projects and private sector financing. Japan looks to invest 200 billion USD in the proposed project.¹⁸

India has stayed away from the New Silk Road because of strategic and security concerns.¹⁹

The India-Japanese initiatives are part of the Freedom Corridor that stretches from the Asia-Pacific to Africa. In May 2015, Japan launched the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), an initiative for advancing Japan's expertise in infrastructure development.

Japan and India want less costly projects with transparent transactions and better quality infrastructure. On 27 August 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo ABE exposed in Nairobi the concept of "Indo-Pacific": a large space stretching from Africa to the Pacific Ocean, based on multilateralism, International law, free trade and economic development as an alternative to China's plans.²⁰

India and Japan are both worried about the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific. India is preoccupied about Chinese military and civil presence in the Indian Ocean, considered as an "Indian Lake" by New Delhi strategists.

3-2- BIDEN Administration' Build Back Better World (B3W):

In June 2021, the G7 Leaders in Britain committed to launch a values-driven, high-standard and transparent infrastructure partnership to meet global infrastructure development needs, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹

In a time of heightened US-China competition, US President Joe BIDEN and his G7 counterparts agreed to launch Build Back Better World (B3W), an

infrastructure partnership to help narrow the 40 trillion USD infrastructure gap in the developing world by 2035.²²

The B3W initiative aims to mobilize bilateral and multilateral as well as private-sector capital for investment in climate, health and health security, modernized digital technology, gender equity and equality. The B3W is intended to cover low and middle-income countries.

The G7 countries extended invitations to joint to other democracies: India, Australia, South Korea and South Africa.

No specific funding commitments have been made, neither have any multilateral project management coordinating mechanisms been announced. The B3W presents terms and conditions for joining the initiative, including human rights preservation, the rule of law and corruption prevention.

The B3W sends a message that the US is planning to revitalize its role as a key driver of multilateral cooperation on supporting sustainable economic development.²³

The anti-Chinese vision of the B3W program was underlined by American President Joe BIDEN who said that this project offer positive alternatives to debt trap and corruption and that democracy is the best way for delivering results.²⁴

A survey found that 35% of Belt and Road projects were struggling with corruption, labor violations, environmental pollution and public protests.²⁵

The United States is worried about the rise of China and its global assertiveness and that's why Washington adopted the "Pivot toward Asia" strategy in 2011. In 2020, 51 % of the American military forces were stationed in the Asia-Pacific area. The United States sees China as a global competitor and as a threat to the rules-based International order promoted by Washington since 1945. Between 2001 and 2018, estimations say that 3,7 millions jobs were destroyed in the United States because of Chinese concurrence.²⁶

After the TRUMP Administration (trade war with China in 2018), the BIDEN Administration adopted many initiatives to counter China: the QUAD Security Framework, the alliance of democracies and the AUKUS military alliance on 15 September 2021. The US and China are in a battle to win hearts and minds in the developing and emerging countries.²⁷

3.3. European Union' Global Gateway:

The Foreign Affairs Council on 12 July 2021 requested the Commission and the High Representative to prepare an EU global connectivity strategy.

On 1 December 2021, the European Union unveiled the Global Gateway, its plan to support infrastructure development around the world. This would mobilize 300 billion euro between 2021-2027 for connectivity projects, notably in the digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research sectors.²⁸

Between 2014 and 2018, the EU and EU countries provided 350 billion euro in ODA grant equivalent while the Belt and Road Initiative provided around 200-400 billion euro in loans, according to estimates of the American Enterprise Institute and UNCTAD. Europe's role as a donor is more significant than China, given that a grant represents a much bigger financial contribution than a loan.

Belt and Road megaprojects worsened the macroeconomic situation of several countries: Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan and Tajikistan.

Global Gateway sum is composed of: 135 billion euro in investment foreseen under the European Fund for Sustainable Development plus (EFSD+), 18 billion euro in grants (EU external assistance programs) and 145 billion euro in investments by EU countries financial and development finance institutions.

It is about increasing investments promoting democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, secure infrastructures that catalyze private sector investment. The EU is exploring the possibility of establishing a European Export Credit Facility.²⁹

Global Gateway focuses on limiting risks of debt distress in partner countries: the EU funding model is a mix of grants, soft loans and guarantees aimed at crowding private sector investments, while the Belt and Road exclusively focuses on loans. The EU requires partner countries to adhere to the rule of law, upholding high standards of human, social and workers rights, as well as a respect for international norms and standards of intellectual property.

Global Gateway has a strong focus on expertise, alongside financial assistance. Global Gateway takes an ethical approach so that infrastructure projects do not create unsustainable debt and support sustainable development fully in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.³⁰

The Global Gateway approach is based on democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, security-focused and catalyzing private sector investment.

For the European Union, China is a cooperation and negotiating partner for the EU but is also an economic competitor and a systemic rival in an increasing number of areas.³¹

The European Union is the first economic and commercial power in the world and is a central actor on the international arena. Anyway, the political influence of the EU is weak and the European countries prefer to take their own initiatives in diplomacy and foreign affairs.³²

The European Union entered in a new phase of rivalry and competition with China, seen as an authoritarian power that doesn't respect the rule of law, democracy and International law. The Europeans don't want to be left behind in this global struggle for influence and markets and they seem to have chosen the path of an alliance with the United States, Japan and India to counter the "Russia-China" tandem.

United Kingdom post-Brexit launched Clean Green Initiative at COP26 in November 2021 to help developing countries take advantage of green technology and grow their economies sustainably. Initiative includes a doubling of UK aid-funded green investments to more than 3 billion pound over five years and new guarantees to support clean infrastructure projects, through coordination between governments, donors, development banks and the private sector to connect the pipelines of green projects with funding and investments.³³

4. Conclusion

China was the first great power to initiate a vast geopolitical project to develop and interconnect the World through the "Belt & Road Initiative" (2013). According to the American Enterprise Institute, over the 2014-2018 period, Chinese investments in countries broadly considered to be BRI members were worth 190 billion USD. Construction contracts were worth 388 billion USD. In terms of global development finance provided by China's major policy banks, 462 billion USD for the 2008-2019 period.¹³⁴

The objective of Beijing, in line with its "win-win approach" was to sustain its economic growth and development, and in the same time allow the development of large areas of Asia, Africa and to connect with Europe.

After the COVID-19 pandemic and in a moment when the Belt & Road Initiative showed signs of weakness (debt-trap accusations, decrease of loans and projects), the Western countries grouped in the G7 launched their own infrastructure and connectivity projects and programs.

The challenge for the United States is to stay the Global player of an integrated world. Neither isolationism, nor hegemonic domination, the American policy is to be the leader of communication and information networks in the 21st Century.

For the European Union, the objective is the stabilization of the emerging and developing economies, their legal and economic modernization and the imposition of the EU norms and procedures.

The World has entered in a new era of Great powers rivalry and competition, and the infrastructure gap in the Global South is one of the key areas of this new kind of "global game". The role of the emerging and developing countries has entered a new phase: obliged to choose between competing partners, the emerging and developing countries must avoid to become the closed area of competition and rivalry.

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