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## **When Geopolitics Meets Development on the Belt and Road: A Confucian Journey**

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### **Abstract**

As China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) traverses the decade that began with a global pandemic, big infrastructure plans are not enough. The coronavirus pandemic, as in many sectors, has hastened the imperative for adaptive change. Development in its wider sense needs to be rediscovered. This is where Confucian philosophy can help. As with the BRI itself there are in fact many routes and directions to development. In cultivating/developing ourselves and others, Confucius would concur that we can live harmoniously without being the same or privileging a more narrowly economic version of development. This change would amount to a culturally-infused political economy within the BRI, where infrastructures of the mind matter as much as the nuts and bolts of ports and transport links. More specifically, the BRI is well positioned to spread a different ontology of development at a time when a virus had forced the world into re-examining its old assumptions.

**Key Words:** development, geopolitics, Confucianism, China, BRI

### **Introduction**

In 2013 the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) announced a grand project that promised to add a new chapter to geopolitical and geo-economic history. Known as the 'Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative' – abbreviated to 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) and later rebranded the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) – it came to represent a distinctively Chinese approach to transregional development. Western media have tended to downplay the strengths of this approach, including its potential for transformative relations. China has commonly been accused of engaging in 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Lindberg and Lahiri, 2018) for the purpose of taking over resources or strategic assets. Not only do such accounts ignore the agency of developing countries with whom China engages, but also feed into the older 'China threat thesis' narrative that sees China as a malign influence in global affairs and US power, in particular (Dellios and Ferguson, 2013). What if the BRI, on the contrary, turns out to be the bearer of values that are more aligned to a post-COVID world than the great power politics that preceded it? The BRI is, after all, a work-in-progress. There is no philosophical channel running deeply within it. So far, the

rhetoric of new ‘silk roads’ connecting markets and cultures in a peaceful way amounts to heritage claims. Such heritage, derived from traditional China, aligns with the national ‘rejuvenation’ goal of socialist China under President Xi Jinping.

Whilst Chinese philosophy with strategic applications contains several different schools of thought, including a parallel to classical realism, the pandemic has opened the possibility for a stronger Confucian ethic on the part of China and less concern about strategic grievances towards the US and its allies. Indeed, the whole idea of competing powers in an economic and technological race needs to be reconsidered in view of growing demand for global public goods in the COVID era. This is where Confucian philosophy can be of assistance. As van Norren (2020) observes, “. . . traditional ideas go against the current ‘Western’ capitalistic paradigm, which is putting economy before society and nature. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed challenges of this current model and an urgent need to transform towards a more sustainable society.” So, too, Grünberg and Geddes (2020) have found: “The Covid-19 pandemic and the global climate crisis have not only had a dramatic impact on millions of lives across the globe, they have also put the spotlight on critical national responsibilities and the need for global cooperation.”

## **The Future meets the Past in the Eurasian Heartland and the Indian Ocean Rimland**

The BRI, in its geographic spread, cannot ignore geopolitics – be it in terms of realist calculation or Confucian concern for global public goods. Even to the casual observer, the new ‘silk roads’ point to a return to the pivotal role of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean rimland geopolitically. The importance of Eurasia may be appreciated in the emergence of three ‘resuming’ powers – China, India and Russia – as well as regional organisations: notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and its complementary counterpart, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). As to the maritime importance of the Indian Ocean, this is reflected in the shift in terminology from the ‘Asia-Pacific,’ a term that takes in the Americas, to the more geopolitically-minded ‘Indo-Pacific’ that shifts the focus in the other direction – to the Indian subcontinent, eastern Africa and the Middle East. An Indo-Eurasian sphere better expresses the proto BRI map that begins in China, travelling across land and sea until it meets in Europe. This terminus of the two silk roads brings Europe back into centre stage, a position that has for so long been overshadowed or subsumed by the New World of North American power. The latter however is being re-incorporated through the BRI project as it expands in scope.

Before contemplating the future, however, an excursion into the geopolitical past will help elucidate the significance of change via a recalibrated BRI that finds itself on a post-pandemic trajectory. Geopolitics as understood in the West is normally associated with Political Realism or *Realpolitik* – that is, a calculation of advantage, the use of grand strategies across space to access resources, and a ruthless competition with rival powers. This is quite the opposite end of the spectrum of a Confucian-style geopolitics that is yet to be fully realised, even though the philosophy behind it is two-and-a-half thousand years old.

### **Classical Geopolitics: Heartland, Rimland and Seapower**

The guru of classical geopolitics as articulated in the West is British political geographer Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947). He is celebrated as the father of geopolitics, even though he was not the originator of the term. This distinction goes to Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen who introduced the neologism ‘geopolitics’ in 1899 to express in

more ‘scientific’ terms the relationship between geography and politics. Naturally, this relationship goes back to tribal times, but it took on a special significance after the ‘great powers’ had colonised much of the globe and were in competition with one another. It was within this congested world of colonial intrigue that Mackinder earned his reputation. He argued that whoever controlled the Eurasia heartland – in Mackinder’s phrase, the “geographical pivot of history” (1904) – would control the world as political units grew in size. This became known as the Heartland Theory. It found its laboratory in ‘The Great Game’ played across Eurasia by the imperial powers (Dellios and Ferguson, 2018).

Britain had much at stake in this game. It invaded Tibet in September 1904 (having begun an expedition there in December 1903 under Sir Francis E. Younghusband) and imposed the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty that attempted to exclude any other foreign power from political influence in the region. Britain wanted to counter Russia’s expansion into Central Asia, create a buffer between British-ruled India and Manchu-ruled China (which exercised suzerainty over Tibet) and to advance its own interests by opening trade routes across India, Tibet and China. This “late Victorian imperialist,” as Tristram Hunt described Mackinder, offered a theory of power which spoke directly to British foreign policy aims. In doing so, only the Realist rules of the game were applied: “Global diplomacy was now a zero-sum game, with every national victory won through the crushing of a competitor. As such, all talk of ethics and morality in foreign policy was for the birds . . . The most important landmass – the ‘geographical pivot of history’ – was central Eurasia, stretching from the edges of Europe across the steppes, desert and grassland of Russia until the Sea of Japan” (Hunt, 2009). He then quotes Mackinder’s aphorism: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland/Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island/Who rules the World-Island commands the World” (Mackinder, 1919).

In his famous ‘Pivot’ paper of January 1904, Mackinder argued that the Age of Exploration, which he termed the Columbian Epoch (starting with Christopher Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of America in 1492) was ending after approximately four centuries. The world was becoming a ‘closed system’ (Mackinder, 1904). He feared Heartland supremacy would rule over European seapowers like Great Britain. While the Second World War (WW2) did show, as C. Dale Walton observed, “how close Mackinder’s fears came to being fulfilled” (Walton, 2007: 1), the great geographer underestimated a singular source of protection afforded to European seapowers. This came from offshore American seapower.

So it was that Rimland Theory emerged as the counter to Heartland Theory. Its originator was Nicholas J. Spykman (1893–1943), an academic at Yale University. Through his writings in *The Geography of the Peace* (1944) Spykman planted “the seeds of the Atlantic Alliance [NATO] and advanced the focus on Russian power as a threat to global security” (Garfinkle, 2003: 266). This, in turn, promoted the strategy of containment. Spykman was interested in Mackinder’s geopolitical analysis but inverted it: substituting the periphery for the heartland as the true ‘pivot.’ What Mackinder termed the “outlying island” of America was of prime concern to Spykman: it would not do for the United States to find the Atlantic dominated by Germany and the Pacific zone coming under Japanese control. With both being allied (the axis powers of WW2), encirclement of the United States would have been the outcome. Understandably, Spykman – like Mackinder – reflected the anxieties of his time.

Where geopolitics initially served empire and later found relevance in Cold War containment thinking, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has seen a revival under the transformative process of globalization, prompting international relations scholars to redefine its workings and protagonists. Some still speak of “the enduring realities of ocean and earth” (Loosely, 2013, book review of Kaplan, 2012), others are captivated by its new possibilities when information technology overrides geography and war is fought not in physical space but in

cyberspace. All of this, however, does not dispel the essence of the geopolitical quest. Is it one of controlling power? Can it remain a hegemonic project of ‘ruling the world’ or ‘controlling its destiny’? Does it still presume an underlying ‘us’ and ‘them,’ friend and foe, dichotomy? Or can it be one based on ‘common destiny’ and ‘win-win’ theory? ‘Critical geopolitics’ has attempted to break out of the classical mould by analysing the construction of ‘space’ and ‘identity’ as narratives of power. However, it tends to be more reactive to classical geopolitics than proactive in turning the page to the next stage of geopolitical thought.

This is where the rise of China and its Confucian cultural base have a role to play. It is one which is performed with a whole cast of ‘rising powers’ on a stage where the spotlight has returned to the old silk and spice routes across an Afro-Indo-Eurasia world of trade and civilizational diversity. This has revitalized South-South cooperation, especially in light of strengthening trade and aid from China compared to the developed nations of the ‘North.’ Beijing speaks of a ‘Community of Common Destiny’ (see below); and India has entered its Act East phase rather than simply ‘looking East.’ For example, at the inaugural Indian Ocean Conference 2016 (IOC 2016) held in Singapore in September, India’s “peaceful and spiritual connections and intent” with “its eastern neighbours” were highlighted (Cordner, 2016). Moreover, India’s strategic interests of the Act East policy have been presented in the evocative language of culture: SAGAR, the acronym for ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region,’ is a play on the Sanskrit word for ocean, ‘sagar,’ and the ocean is the unifying element of this regional embrace (Dellios and Ferguson, 2018).

## **A Confucian Turn in Geopolitical Thinking**

Asia has shed its designation as the Far or Near East of the British colonial imagination. It harbours some of the most dynamic nations in the world. Containment is no longer feasible or desirable in an increasingly multipolar world. The Rimland, like the Cold War, has faded from global imaginings but remains troubled in many sites – especially in the Middle East where the promise of an Arab Spring gave way to ‘Islamic State,’ unremitting misery and massive refugee flows. From an amphibious buffer between land and sea power, a contested zone of competing strategic systems, the Rimland is now in a state of ‘betwixt and between:’ neither frozen in past politics nor born into a new transregional modality. It is in this context of China’s plans to build ‘silk roads’ of development from Asia through to Africa and the Middle East – across the Eurasian heartland and the oceanic rimlands – that a new Confucian-style geopolitics may arise. Being of Confucian civilizational origin, one may expect the restoration of geography to the humanities and not only to a deterministic ‘science.’ This change has been underway even in the Western formulation of geopolitics. As Garfinkle (2003) noted: “Kjellen sought a *science* of international politics” when he coined the term; today, it has kept its name of geopolitics, “but no one thinks of it a science” (264 & 267).

A Confucian turn in geopolitics would add an Eastern route via ‘win-win’ dynamics and ‘infinite game’ assumptions (elaborated below). Such a route could become a primary conduit of development as the process would entail a cultivation of the other as well as the self; a mutuality of environmental care and human endeavour; and of economic benefits in the presence of cultural awareness. The security ensuing from such ‘geopolitics’ would logically – even if in the non-linear fashion typical of complex systems – lead to a Confucian understanding of the ordering of the world (Dellios and Ferguson, 2013).

## What is Win-Win?

The term ‘win-win’ has become a mainstay of official Chinese discourse to describe a strategy of mutual gain. For example, at the 2015 Boao Forum, President Xi Jinping linked the concept of ‘win-win’ relations in Asia and beyond to the idea of a ‘Community of Common Destiny:’

“. . . The interests of Asian countries have become intertwined, and a community of common destiny has increasingly taken shape.

. . . To build a community of common destiny, we need to seek win-win cooperation and common development. Our friends in Southeast Asia say that the lotus flowers grow taller as the water rises. Our friends in Africa say that if you want to go fast, walk alone; and if you want to go far, walk together. Our friends in Europe say that a single tree cannot block the chilly wind. And Chinese people say that when big rivers have water, the small ones are filled; and when small rivers have water, the big ones are filled. All these sayings speak to one same truth, that is, only through win-win cooperation can we make big and sustainable achievements that are beneficial to all. The old mindset 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. The vision of win-win cooperation not only applies to the economic field, but also to the political, security, cultural and many other fields. It not only applies to countries within the region, but also to cooperation with countries from outside the region” (Xi, 2015).

President Xi also applied it to the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, at a time of heightened criticism that China was exploiting poorer countries (the so-called ‘debt-trap diplomacy’), when he said the BRI’s aim was “to advance win-win cooperation among countries and build a new platform for international trade, while also creating development opportunities for China” (Reuters, 2019).

‘Win-win’ can be viewed as a slogan borrowed from game theory to indicate no losers in a relationship – in other words, a non-zero sum game. Xi’s Boao Forum speech mentions the opposite, a zero-sum game, which he attributes to the “old mindset” (a reference to another commonly employed phrase, the ‘Cold War mentality’) in which one party benefits at the other’s expense. Power transition theory is not confined to Cold War thinking but is based on a zero-sum calculus and represents a Realist reading of international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus a rising power like China is viewed as a challenge by the existing preeminent power, the United States. In keeping with the use of analogous sayings (above), China and the United States might be likened to the proverb about two tigers that cannot live on the same mountain. However, as Andrew Billo (2012) has pointed out: “While it may be true that ‘two tigers cannot share one mountain,’ China and America, as the Confucian saying goes, can indeed ‘live harmoniously without being the same.’” Potentially, under a less polarized geopolitical environment, this would allow “progress in building a new type of international relations,” as President Xi expressed it in his ‘Community of Common Destiny’ speech (Xi, 2015).

## How does Win-win relate to Confucian Interdependence?

The Confucian rendering of interdependence flows from the concept of *ren* (benevolence, humaneness) which comprises the characters: 人 meaning ‘person’ and 二 meaning ‘two’. Humaneness, based on the experience of interacting with other people, requires *li* (rites) as its outer expression. *Li* articulates proper (considerate) behaviour towards others. Translated to international relations, it speaks to the need to build trust, as in the common diplomatic expression in China of ‘mutual respect and mutual benefit.’ Derived from the PRC’s foundational foreign policy of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. These are: (1) mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; (4) equality and mutual benefit; and (5) peaceful coexistence.

The criticism that this could amount to little more than ‘empty ritual’ and mere sloganeering is valid when in the hands of *xiaoren* (petty person) leadership or within the scope of zero-sum strategy. Reports indicating that China has been caught up in zero-sum games on its land and sea borders are common. A couple of examples will suffice. On land there is an echo of Mackinder’s world, with India being described as moving “another pawn in its Great Game against China by helping to build an east-west rail link across the Himalayan country of Nepal;” while the *The Annapura Post* of Nepal was cited as saying that China was concerned over “Nepal’s tardy progress on its One Belt, One Road initiative” that would see infrastructure and new trade routes developed (Bearup, 2016: 10). By 2019, developments were favouring China: Nepal had chosen a Chinese railway-track gauge for the proposed line, saying it was less expensive, compared to the wider Indian gauge (Sharma, 2019). At sea, not only is China vulnerable to a Rimland Theory of encirclement in the US-friendly island chain that stretches from Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines down to the Malacca Strait (whose significance is discussed below), but its ‘fortification’ of the South China Sea via ‘island-building’ has been roundly condemned (Gearney, 2020). Similarly, China’s relations with the Philippines have been described as having a deficit of soft power with a “net trust rating of minus 24 per cent” (Hodge, 2016: 10). Despite this, at the government level, economic ties have remained strong. The same applies to Sino-Myanmar relations: “anti-Chinese sentiment” among the population is not reflected at the government level (Hodge, 2021).

Even among countries with Confucian traditions harmony does not come easily, as shown in habits of distrust within Sino-Japanese, Korean-Japanese or Sino-Vietnamese relations. Compounding historical animosities that continue to fuel threat perceptions is the Westphalian system which privileges national interest. The anarchic international order in which there is no higher authority than the sovereign state can, however, lean to the side of friend rather than foe. This would be legitimized in the interests of mutual survival – especially under the current conditions of globalization where cooperation is needed more than ever. This is not readily found due to an increasingly fraught geopolitics globally (US-China, NATO-Russia) and regionally (such as Iran-Saudi Arabia, India-Pakistan) which the Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Dan Smith, described in 2021 as “toxic”:

“That toxin hinders co-operation to end armed conflicts. It is the reason why the global system of conflict management is weaker than at any time since 1990. And it means that the appetite for co-operation is declining at the very moment when the world faces a range of challenges – climate change, pandemics, potential cyber vulnerability – to which responding co-operatively is the realistic way forward” (Smith, 2021).

In light of this crucial time of change that demands cooperation in the face of a trust-deficit, alternative ideas are needed. China, in preparing the ground for the growth of an alternative geopolitics (wittingly or unwittingly, irrespective of motives), has largely opted for an ‘anarchy of friends’ through its win-win developmental strategy of regional, and eventually global, engagement (Dellios and Ferguson, 2013: Chp. 5). Despite – and because of – the “increasingly toxic” (Smith, 2021) geopolitics of the prevailing period in international relations, the correlative (mutually regarding) promise of the BRI is still worth exploring.

## **New Silk Roads of Development: From Dream to Reality**

The headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris was chosen for the launch for the current leadership’s win-win developmental strategy. There, in March 2014, President Xi Jinping articulated a ‘Chinese Dream’ that included cultural diversity in the global order (CCTV, 2014). The economic and financial underpinnings of the Chinese Dream had taken the form of the BRI. In addition, to help finance this mega project, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was initiated and began operations from its headquarters in Beijing in 2016. By 2020, membership had grown from 57 to 103 states, and it was capitalized at \$100 billion (AIIB, 2021). Another recent multilateral bank available to the BRI is the New Development Bank of the BRICS (an acronym that groups the ‘rising powers’ of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). There are also national banks for funding development, such as the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China. A dedicated fund for the new ‘silk roads’ project is the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund established in 2014. In 2018, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) was established for a number of reasons, most notably, according to Cheng (2019), to:

- “be in charge of the flows that are concessional in nature (or the parts that qualify as ODA), such as grants as well as no-interest and concessional loans;”
- “strive to become a unified actor at the center of China’s foreign aid system,” which relates to the need to manage; and
- “facilitate BRI projects” because of the multiplicity of players (AIIB, New Development Bank, the Silk Road Fund, and others – see above).

When it comes to development, the BRI may have captured the headlines but it is not outside the scope of Chinese policy in developing poorer regions. This goes back to Chinese diplomacy of the 1960s when mutual benefit and solidarity within the developing world were emphasized. This grew out of the spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference. Leaders of newly independent nations in Africa and Asia met in the city of Bandung in Indonesia to seek a voice in world politics (leading to the Non-Aligned Movement) and to promote mutual help (becoming South-South cooperation). China played an important role at this conference; it is still commemorated with Xi Jinping calling for the “Bandung spirit’ to be carried forward (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2015). By the early 1970s, China’s “foreign aid amounted to 5.9 percent of total government spending . . . peaking at 6.9 percent in 1973” (Cheng, 2019).

In the second decade of the 21st century China had overtaken the World Bank as the biggest source of development loans (Hilpert and Wacker, 2015). China remains the world’s largest official lender (via the government and state-owned entities), “with outstanding claims in 2017 surpassing the loan books of the IMF, World Bank and of all other 22 Paris Club governments combined” (Horn, Reinhart, and Trebesch, 2020). The World Bank statistics for the period 2014 to 2018 indicate that China was the leading bilateral official lender for “51 of



the 72 low-income countries, and for 32 of the 40 African countries” (Huang and Brautigam, 2020). By comparison, Japan is the leading bilateral lender in seven countries, Saudi Arabia in six, and the United States in one – Somalia (Huang and Brautigam, 2020). The same World Bank dataset projects debt service between 2020 and 2024. It found that China accounted for 20% total public external debt in the 72 countries and that for Africa the figure was 22% (Huang and Brautigam, 2020). When the COVID-19 pandemic prompted concern about debt repayment, G-20 members pledged to suspend debt service between 1 May and 31 December 2020. On 17 June, President Xi Jinping called on Chinese banks to join the G-20 moratorium and “to hold friendly consultations with African countries according to market principles to work out arrangements for commercial loans with sovereign guarantees” (Huang and Brautigam, 2020).

In a study which drew on data from the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) to understand China’s debt cancellation and restructuring in Africa, it was found that between 2000 and 2019 China “restructured or refinanced approximately US\$ 15 billion of debt” on the continent (Acker, Brautigam, Huang, 2020: 5). Moreover, as the authors point out, this was done without seizing assets, enforcing payments through the legal system or applying penalty interest rates. More interesting from the Confucian development perspective is that the project’s potential is deemed more compelling than the prevailing limitations—that is, being development rather than debt focused:

“Chinese lenders have tended to treat restructuring or cancellation loan-by-loan, not on the basis of the entire debt portfolio in that country. This parallels an earlier emphasis on ‘development sustainability’ (looking at the future contribution of the project) rather than ‘debt sustainability’ (looking at the current state of the economy) as the basis of project lending decisions” (Acker, Brautigam, and Huang, 2020: 5).

According to China’s 2021 foreign aid white paper, *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, the PRC has provided three forms of aid – grants, interest-free loans, and concessional loans – to 20 regional and multilateral organizations and 122 countries in the three-year period 2013-2018 (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021). Compared to the previous 2014 foreign aid white paper, aid has expanded to new areas such as “Gender Equality” (Section IV.5), “Sustainable and Innovation-Driven Economic Growth” (Section IV.7) and “Improving Governance” (Section VI.1), plus more attention has been directed to humanitarian aid (Section V: “Responding to Global Humanitarian Challenges Together”) (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021; Chao and Yuxuan, 2021). With regard to China’s COVID-19 humanitarian efforts, the white paper emphasized the extent of Beijing’s aid, doing “all it could to aid and assist more than 150 countries and international organizations . . . This was China’s most intensive and largest-scale emergency humanitarian assistance mission since 1949” (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021: Section V.2). The tone of the white paper is notable in its consistency of themes that draw on Chinese philosophy (especially Confucian values) including the “ideal of universal harmony,” “repaying kindness with kindness,” “a sense of justice and a feeling of sympathy” (Section 1.1), and the standard bearer of Beijing’s slogans – “promoting a global community of shared future” that entails “a new model of international relations based on mutual respect, equity, justice and win-win cooperation” (Section I.2). In this respect the BRI is given extensive treatment (Section III).

In many ways, China sees development as the highest form of security (Cohen, 2014), and this has been expressed in terms of shared national interests. Returning to geopolitics, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation represents another type of Heartland. Instead of Mackinder’s notion of control, development through shared interests has a greater affinity

with correlative thinking. This can apply not only internally but also across organisations. Thus far the SCO and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have opted to cooperate rather than compete for influence in the region, inclusive of the overland component of BRI.

Thus development can be envisaged as a multi-dimensional win-win game. It is one in which, as the 2021 white paper emphasized, “world stability and prosperity cannot be achieved unless developing countries can progress” (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021: Section I.2). It stands in contrast to the finiteness of ‘The Great Game’ in Mackinder’s day when colonial powers held sway and promises a new kind of geopolitics – one that is played as an “infinite game” (Carse, 1986) of expanding relations philosophically and structurally (via multilateralism), but with zero-sum games still existing at various nodes of interaction. Some categories of zero-sum games are amenable to change into positive-sum games. They include bilateral relations that still suffer from historical and other animosities, such as those noted above, as well as the wider Non-Traditional Security (NTS) issues that concern the environment and society.

Indeed, for the transition from Chinese Dream to a BRI reality that accords with the dream, care needs to be taken to encourage the cultural traditions that are invoked in current policies and that can help shape its future.

## **BRI’s Dimensions**

President Xi Jinping’s announcement in 2013 of the land and sea routes comprising the BRI was made in neighbouring capitals that represent large, developing and strategically well-placed countries in Central and Southeast Asia. The ‘Belt’ he announced in September 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan and the ‘Road’ a month later before the Indonesian Parliament, during his official visits to these countries. As explained in the government document, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*: “Accelerating the building of the Belt and Road can help promote the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development” (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2015). The Belt and Road traverse three continents, two seas and two oceans. The continents are Asia, Europe and Africa, with the Middle East connecting all three. Their maritime counterparts are the South China Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean’s southern sector. As the ‘Vision and Actions’ document continues:

“... The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China’s coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other” (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2015).

The BRI is concerned with large infrastructure development projects such as ports and highways, as well as the fundamental idea of connecting: this is facilitated by the physical and digital means available in today's world. The cause of connecting across continents and their cultures for trade (as distinct from conquest) was evident in the historical dimension of BRI. It goes back to the trade routes collectively known as the Silk Road, by which caravans transported Chinese silk and other luxury goods. Products, ideas and religions flowed in both directions. Art and music were also diffused, with Indian, Persian, Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur influences detectable in Central Asian paintings. Silk, though the most valuable of trade items, especially when it reached the West (Rome and Constantinople), was in fact one among many on offer. Gold, textiles, and coral, for example, travelled East, while furs, cinnamon and bronze weapons went West. Eventually, the secret of silk production from silk worms could not be kept within China, though it remained a leading supplier of high quality silk. Explorers along the Silk Road region included Chinese, Indians, and even Europeans whose most famous merchant-explorer, Marco Polo (circa 1254-1324 CE), set forth from Venice.

There was also a maritime Silk Road that conveyed both trade and culture. When the Central Asian trade routes were mired in warfare among rival kingdoms, the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) compensated by turning to southern maritime routes. Beyond conveying goods for trade, the sea also served as a pilgrimage trail. Both China and Southeast Asia engaged in a vast Buddhist cultural sphere of diplomacy. (Islam was to come later for maritime Southeast Asia.) An important centre of Buddhist studies and worship was Srivijaya (7th to possibly the 13th century) – a predecessor to modern day Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore which jointly manage the Malacca Strait. Chinese pilgrim-scholars on their way to India would regularly stop in Srivijaya for study. Having borrowed Buddhism from India, China identified as a Buddhist country in addition to a Daoist and Confucian one, having little difficulty blending the three. Such inclusiveness bodes well for the future of Confucian values along the new paths of development in the BRI cultural context.

Besides sharing a common religious culture, Srivijaya (which received tribute from its own region) was a tributary to China, and this gave it prestige as well as special trading rights. Tributary relations were the norm in pre-European international relations. The East Asian world order was hierarchically structured rather than horizontally as in today's Westphalian state system. China saw itself as the political and spiritual centre of 'all-under-Heaven' (*tianxia*) while those polities that sent envoys to China with tribute (gifts) and kowtowed to the emperor as the head of the regional 'family,' were also operating within their own politico-cultural logic (known as 'mandala' polities in Southeast Asia), and showed agency in terms of the pursuit of vital interests. These included trade, regional stability and political kudos within a domestic constituency – interests that are still pertinent in a horizontally structured international system.

Relatedly, as a spiritual centre, imperial China viewed its role as ensuring harmony: the Chinese emperor performed rites to ensure the Middle Kingdom was in a state of equilibrium between potentiality and actuality, between the yang-power of Heaven and the yin-nourishment of Earth. This arrangement was intended to bestow harmony to 'all-under-Heaven.' However, no amount of ritual observance on the part of the emperor could prevent the collapse of the *tianxia* system. It ended in the late 19th century when European imperialism imposed its own international norms.

As discussed above, traditional European geopolitics was based on finite games of maximising power at the expense of others. The maritime geography of trade dictated control of the trading routes. Assertion over both rimland and sea mattered in securing ports and vital 'chokepoints' like the Malacca Strait, the most strategic of commercial waterways and maritime passages in the East-West crossroads. Located between the Indian Ocean and the

South China Sea, it prompted the early 16th century Portuguese adventurer Tome Pires to observe: “Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice” (Courtesao, 1944). Prior to the Europeans, however, there was a networked system of political relationships superimposed over a map in which the Malacca Strait under Srivijaya (tributary of China) represented the centre of two of three ‘trading circles’. Drawing on documentation of traditional maritime routes, Qin and Xiang have shown these three circles to be “between China and Southeast Asia (mainly Sumatra and Java), between Southeast Asia and Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and between the Arabian area and east Africa . . . Sri Vijaya and Basra were the two key points of trading interchange that connected the three circles” (Qin and Xiang, 2011).

China no longer secures its strategic trade routes via tributary relations. Rather, Beijing’s position is that it seeks to establish a common security through cooperative regionalism and BRI falls within the scope. This is the theory. What of the practice? What is there to ensure that this does not become another finite game in which China, like the Portuguese and other European imperialists, simply seeks to control its surrounding geography for strictly personal gain (which equates with what Confucius termed *xiaoren* – the petty person, as opposed to the morally noble person, *junzi*) rather than liberate it from a winner-takes-all mentality? Already there are signs on land and sea, as noted above, of finite game zones and relationships. Moreover, the pitfalls of corruption and the dangers of building expensive but under-utilized ‘white elephant’ projects are ever-present.

An area which suggests a propensity for Confucian rather than zero-sum games is the concept of an ‘ecological civilization.’ Enshrined in the CCP constitution in 2012, ‘ecological civilization’ has been promoted through both legal and motivational means. President Xi Jinping’s ‘Beautiful China Initiative’ was advanced at the 19th CCP National Congress in 2017, positioning the environment as an intrinsic component of the economy rather than a zero-sum victim of growth. In the 2021 development white paper, China has committed to “the vision of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” and “has shared its experience in green development . . . expanded international cooperation on wildlife protection and desertification control, to join other countries in preserving our beautiful planet” (Section IV.8).

There are many paths to development, depending on individual conditions and culture, but it seems that joint efforts to develop within the wider ecological support system brings back the notion of civilization in the presence of nature – not through its conquest. China is clearly trying to reconnect with its ‘roots’ in order to flourish (even if only initially at the Chinese Communist Party level) and this entails a philosophy of helping others to realise themselves developmentally. A further philosophical foundation may be found in the quest for equilibrium and cosmic unity among Heaven-Human-Earth. This allows for a deeper appreciation of the environment, human potential, and the expanding circles of relationships from one’s family to the planet. To ensure that such cosmic unity and ideas of all-under-Heaven being one are shared by others, multiple modes of thought need to be engaged. This is not merely a matter of tolerance but inter-subjectivity and suggests an interplay between Chinese and other traditions. This is because “*tianxia* does not by itself supply an adequate basis for political pluralism or democratic values such as egalitarianism” (Ferguson and Dellios, 2017: 138); and this affects environmental policy too. However, a future *junzi* of geopolitics cannot be ruled out. It will be recalled that Confucius used the term *junzi* for a morally noble person, in contrast to the self-serving *xiaoren* (petty person). Converting PRC slogans to widely accepted norms would take time, but the groundwork has been prepared for the BRI to be elevated to the field of infinite games. The stimulus of a global pandemic may prove to be critical for this transition. Infrastructures of the mind are as much the purview of a philosophically informed BRI as the physical and economic means of

development. China's 2021 white paper on development stated, as noted above, that "world stability and prosperity cannot be achieved unless developing countries can progress." This is where geopolitics meets development.

## Conclusion

Whether in their historical or contemporary frames of reference, trade and economic interests on the silk roads are accompanied by cultural interchange. Confucian geopolitics seeks out the cooperative and enabling features of geopolitics which are not only desirable in themselves but also beneficial in a practical sense: security is better served – for China and for others – correlatively. As with interpersonal relationships, so too international relations can be modelled on infinite game engagements, but with a clear awareness of lose-lose possibilities if common problems are not approached cooperatively. Confucianism's focus on relationships is ultimately understood within the cosmic triad of Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings, which form a unity. This is much more significant than a territorial empire, or sphere of influence, suggested by the *xiaoren* rendition of BRI. Indeed, because it is still in its formative stages BRI could be hijacked by *xiaoren* profit-driven governance or fragmented by ignorance and haphazard planning. If this were to occur, an opportunity for win-win development would have been delayed yet again, despite the opportunity for new beginnings in a post-COVID era. As the ancients would lament, Heaven has forsaken us. But in the absence of inevitability, a quality intrinsic to the philosophical roots of Chinese culture, putting the ethical or moral *dao*/way into practice (Confucius, 1979: *Analects* 18.7) should be pursued irrespective of anticipated developmental rewards. Despite its geopolitical twists and turns, this 'way' is a process that can be envisaged as a Confucian journey along the Belt and Road.

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