Opinion Piece on China's Belt Road Initiative
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"What the Chinese Communist Party has been doing to undermine democracy and intervene in foreign states is simply the party's way of interacting with the world,"[1] said Peter Mattis, a research fellow in China Studies at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in the United States. Since the era of Mao, Mainland China has sought to challenge what it believed to be the illegitimate international order led by the West. But during the 1950s, China was still an infant marxist-leninist state that lacked the resources to do so. It was not until China experienced tenfold GDP growth from 1978 as a result of trillion-dollar injections from foreign investment, that it began its campaign to compete against the liberal democracies around the world. In the efforts of establishing prominent influence by undermining the state of democracy, China pushed for the One Belt, One Road, or Belt Road Initiative (BRI) as a neo-colonialistic model that grants monetary support to economically deprived nations for political influence in return.

Indeed, China's relationship with foreign nations today shows great resemblance to that of European powers to its colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. But unlike the takeovers by force, the Chinese leadership prefers a gradual "weakening of democratic norms [to establish a permanent] international legitimacy of China's Leninist-capitalist brand of governance."[2] It is, nevertheless, just another means of exploitation through the same notion of unequal exchange and overbearing political influence. And the Belt Road Initiative is China's way of establishing such relationship.

Formally launched in 2013, the Belt Road Initiative was intended to be a "cooperative" ambition to establish a line of terrestrial and maritime infrastructure connecting the flow of goods and services from all Eurasian states to the People's

Republic of China, according the President Xi at the October press conference in Jakarta. In 2015, two additional agencies under China's National Development and Reform Commission (CNDRC), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), were created to allow the Belt Road Initiative to essentially gain unlimited access to Chinese state funds. As the prominent economic powerhouse with a rapidly expanding 11 trillion-dollar GDP since 2015, the BRI has dangerously lured LEDCs throughout the Eurasian Continent to be entrapped in a slavish dependency that participating nations would be upon ratifying the BRI as a participating member.

In the East African nation of Djibouti, the economically fragile dictatorship took a debt worth of 88 percent of the overall 1.72 billion in GDP for 2018 from China, according to a report by the Center for Global Development.[3] Such vulnerability compelled Djibouti President, Ismail Omar Guelleh, to sign Djibouti up for the BRI that would have Djibouti leased sovereign rights of key territorial assets to China. As a result, Beijing built its first overseas military base in Goubet.[4] Such move allows China to gain control of the vital maritime petroleum trade route through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, which directly challenges Washington's long monopoly on control over that key trade route.

In the Central Asian nation of Tajikistan, the economy had been labelled as having the highest risk of debt distress by the IMF and the World Bank. Despite that, Dushanbe took a 72 million dollar project loan from the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank) with an interest way below market rate.[5] Unsurprisingly, in great debt to China, Tajikistan's single largest creditor, Tajikistan in turn serves as China's "first leg" to the BRI having a 3 billion dollar portion of the Central Asia-China gas Pipeline passing through Tajikistan that harvests its rich natural resource—natural gas—and transports the vital natural resource into Mainland

China. Such circumstance grants Beijing great powers in the natural gas market that is imperative to the economic, and to a further extent, political survival of Continental Europe at Tajikistan's expense.[6]

Pakistan, the peripheral state in South Asia, is also in the region and is another LEDC that fell into China's debt trap diplomacy. Being heavily in debt to its biggest creditor, China, through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in conjunction with the BRI, Pakistan was wrestling an estimated 62 billion dollars[7] worth of debt. With very little chance of being able to fulfill its debt payments, Pakistan could either request debt treatment from the Paris Club for the seventh time and to be, very likely, rejected; or, it could follow Tajikistan and Djibouti's footsteps and "kowtow" to Beijing and submit its sovereignty in exchange for debt forgiveness. Unsurprisingly, few months after the release of the economic assessment by the IMF and the World Bank, Pakistan ratified the BRI and the CPEC, where Pakistan was to lease China the port city of Gwadar. This lease, condemned by many, enabled Beijing to not only tighten its grasp on the maritime trade route in the Indian Ocean, but it also empowers Beijing to dominate the flow of capital and goods to the landlocked Central Asian Nations through the Karakoram Highway. This highway provides direct access from the Indian Ocean to Mainland China from the handful of port cities with the sufficient degree of infrastructure established.

Further emboldening Beijing to pursue its expansionist agenda, Sri Lanka is yet another nation to fall into the debt trap. Whenever the President Mahinda Rajapaksa has no choice but to ask for the most merciful creditor in the world, the Chinese Exim Bank, or more specifically, Beijing, for more loans, the answer is most frequently, yes. As a result, according to estimations done by the Sri Lankan Finance Ministry, amongst the estimated 14.8 billion dollars in revenue, 12.3 billion are scheduled for debt payments, and mostly to China.[8] Accordingly, the newly built Hambantota Port located on the southern tip of Sri Lanka was given to China on a 99-year lease. Despite how Indian and other stakeholders allied to the West stressed the importance of a ban of militarized usage of the port, China has now established a de facto naval base in Hambantota that empowers China's military presence in the Indian Ocean and further support its operations in the South China Sea.

After the devastating effects of European Union-imposed austerity on Greece and receiving little-to-no assistance in economic aid by the EU or the United States, Greece became yet another victim to the collection of states entrapped by China's plan to global dominance masqueraded with its supposedly "peaceful nature."[9] With Greece participating in the BRI in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to jointly advance construction of the BRI in 2018,[9] the political narrative of China in Europe changed drastically thanks to its newly-bought voice. In 2018, as the EU Commission was voting on a resolution to condemn China's human right practices (a resolution supported by both the United Nations Human Rights Council and Amnesty International) to condemn Beijing's handling of minorities in the Xinjiang Province, Greece abruptly invoked its veto power and tabled the resolutory effort.

And when the first G7 nation, Italy, formally joined the BRI in early 2019, the G7 summit that was convened in Dinard was relatively silent in raising concerns to the world's most ambitious infrastructure initiative. The ministers of the "Proposed joint communique that included veiled criticisms of China over issues such as intellectual property theft, market access, its military ambitions and human rights abuses,"[10] at the post summit press release made no mention of the BRI or China's alleged wrongdoings in the international community.

All in all, the growing influence that China has in the international community through its neocolonialistic BRI plan had allowed Beijing to spend its riches and procure power of a scale like the United States did under the Marshall plan in 1948. Taking advantage of the economic fragility of underdeveloped, or financially challenged nations around the globe, Beijing has disguised its expansionist vision with the notion of infrastructural development and incitement of local economies. At this rate of growth, the BRI is only a prelude to a rising global power.

Notes

[1] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2018-04-16/autocracy-chinese-characteristics.

[2] Andrea Kendell from the Majalla news outlet describing the interaction that China is having with the world.

[3] "Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective" by John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, March of 2018.
https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf

[4] Ibid., Ft 3.

[5] Ibid., Ft 3.

[6] Ibid., Ft 3.

[7] "The BRI in Pakistan: China's flagship economic corridor" by the Merics Mercrator Institute for China Studies. https://merics.org/en/analysis/bri-pakistan-chinas-flagship-economic-corridor

[8]https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25
/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html

[9] Ibid., Ft 3.

[9] "China, Greece ink BRI Memorandum" by the State Council of the People's Republic of China.

[10] "G7 stays silent over China's Belt and Road Initiative after failing to reach consensus" by Kinling Lo, South China Morning Post.

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3005023/g7-stays-silent-over-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-after