

# Theoretical Contradictions in the Belt and Road Initiative: Examining the Strategic Shifts and Ideological Perspectives

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## Abstract

This research analyzes the theoretical foundations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a specific focus on the ASEAN region. The efforts to revamp the BRI and enhance its long-term viability indicate the importance of BRI not only in the Chinese diplomatic strategy but also in its ideological discourse for Global Governance. This paper examines the theoretical basis for the modernization projects of the BRI by comparing them with the Western models. By critically examining the theoretical presuppositions that equate modernization with the Western governance model, this paper argues how the reformed multilateral strategies of the CCP achieve its global governance goals.

## 1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched as a Global infrastructural development project aimed at improving integration, increasing trade, and creating a Modern Silk Road route.<sup>1</sup> Many neo-realist scholars view BRI as a strategy for power maximization and reshaping the regional order. However, its impact on the ideological discourse - especially after COVID-19 pandemic rebranding efforts - is still unexplored. In this regard, this article complements existing studies of the BRI's theoretical nature by analyzing the shift in the explanations of Chinese meta-narratives through revamping the BRI in the ASEAN region. Drawing on Marxist theory, I trace the links between rhetoric and reality to highlight how the BRI 2.0 strategy contests the existing Marxist explanations and creates a neo-realist framework to define regional and global governance with Chinese characteristics.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars Yang<sup>2</sup>, Liu,<sup>3</sup> and Callahan argue that the BRI exemplifies a pragmatic adaptation of the Marxist doctrine of social transformation and has evolved into an international strategic thought. However, scholars Zhang<sup>4</sup>, Shou<sup>5</sup> and Zhao<sup>6</sup> disagree with this viewpoint and describe the BRI as a successful case of a global application of traditional Chinese values, mainly the idea of a

<sup>1</sup> Apostolopoulou, E. (2021) A novel geographical research agenda on Silk Road urbanisation, *Geographical Journal*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12412>.

<sup>2</sup> Yang, Z. Literature review on Xi Jinping's 'community of shared future for mankind'. *Reform Open Up* 2017, 1, 67–68.

<sup>3</sup> Liu, R. Theoretical Basis of Shared Future for Mankind (Red Culture Site). 2019. Available online: <http://www.hswb.org.cn/wzzx/llyd/zz/2019-05-22/56717.html> (accessed on 25 November 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Khan, U., Wang, H., & Ali, I. (2021). A Sustainable Community of Shared Future for Mankind: Origin, Evolution and Philosophical Foundation. *Sustainability*, 13(16), 9352.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169352>

<sup>5</sup> Shou, X. (2017). 构建人类命运共同体的中国智慧 (Chinese Wisdom of Building Community of Shared Future for Mankind). 中国社会科学报 (China's Social Sciences Newspaper), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Khan, U., Wang, H., & Ali, I. (2021). A Sustainable Community of Shared Future for Mankind: Origin, Evolution and Philosophical Foundation. Sustainability, 13(16), 9352. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169352>

'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' and 'Knowledge & Action in Unity'.<sup>7</sup> These values are rooted in the philosophical thought of Marxism, Confucianism<sup>8</sup>, and the philosophy of Mencius<sup>9</sup>. However, there is a shift in theoretical explanations of the BRI due to its influence on developing countries and regional stability, pointing to neo-realist undertones. The theoretical nature of the BRI is thus contested; however, the guiding principle of Marxist theory offers some insights into its objectives. Central to the BRI are Marx's philosophies of liberation, community, and justice from the superstructure reinforcement by the capitalist institutional arrangements. Marx argued that "*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.*" (German Ideology, 1845–46). His criticism of the capitalist society explains how the institutions often maintain and legitimize structural inequalities by concentrating power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. While his arguments critiqued class and economic systems, the institutional arrangement since the end of the Second World War, offering 'universal values' and making it a norm of governance for all nations, is a product of history and not a universal logic. (Zhong, 2011). The BRI manifests Chinese logic as an appealing alternative that promotes the path of 'civilization evolution' rooted in redefining the governance framework.

The values of liberation, community, and justice are enshrined in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) constitution, which is the fundamental appeal of the Marxist theory (Liu, 2015). Using the two primary elements of Marxist thought for social transformation - Production and Infrastructure, the BRI attempts to generate a sense of pseudo-solidarity among the 'Proletariat nations' to go beyond the neo-imperialist governance models (Naughton 2018). Marx's critique of imperialism as an extension of capitalist structural exploitation applies to the BRI context as the developing nations face inequalities compared to developed countries and have not realized the state of 'full flow of material wealth'. The redistribution of wealth and capacity-building model that the BRI presents unconditionally reflects the contemporary application of Marx's liberation theory which states that "*To achieve a community of free people constructed by free individuality based on common social productive capacity becomes their social wealth.*" This makes it appealing to developing countries in need.<sup>10</sup> BRI's fundamental philosophical justification points to the rhetoric of Marx's vision for collective human progress and community. In addition, Marx's idea of transformation acts as a core principle behind rapid BRI implementation, providing solutions to the problems of developing nations with the promise of transformation. It promises a conducive environment for peaceful coexistence, inclusiveness, development and prosperity.

## 2.1 Rhetoric vs Reality

The traditional binary of Global North and South today has become increasingly inadequate in capturing the complex realities of contemporary international development. This paradigm,

<sup>7</sup> Nathan, A. J., & Zhang, B. (2021). 'A Shared Future for Mankind': Rhetoric and Reality in Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping. Journal of Contemporary China, 31(133), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1926091>

<sup>8</sup> Liu, Z. (2018). The Influence of Confucianism on East Asian Countries. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2020). <https://doi.org/10.2991/icadce-18.2018.14>

<sup>9</sup> David, S. N. (1980). On Translating Mencius. *Philosophy East and West*, 1

<sup>10</sup> Burkett, P. (2017). Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 623–651). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251196-35>

rooted in colonial histories and perpetuated through international institutions, faces mounting challenges as emerging economies reshape global power dynamics and alternative development models gain prominence. The economies of scale promote neoliberal trade policies and economic relations, controlling the discourse over political systems and foreign policy. Meta-narratives of the revival of world civilization, South-South cooperation, and reformed multilateralism through the BRI projects highlight how it differs from the Liberal governance model of the West. This narrative is crucial for the CCP as it seeks to align its global governance initiatives with the UN Governance playbook and reimagine global cooperation with its socialist characteristics. Marxist theory critiques the idea of global expansion and considers it a form of capitalist imperialism. Large-scale investments in the form of BRI projects have the potential to create and perpetuate structural inequalities in developing nations. The focus and goal of BRI projects are on inclusive growth and development, but the *modus operandi* is contradictory. It indicates its dual purpose of expanding China's influence and reducing its reliance on Western governance models while encouraging others to do so. (McBride 2019). The direct conflict between the theoretical foundations of the BRI - Marxist, Neo-realist, or Capitalist, as it adapts to the changing dynamics of the Global North and South, shows the theoretical questions that remain unexplored by the existing scholarship. The shift of the CCP to a 'party-state capitalism' <sup>11</sup> and the revamping of the BRI points to the rhetoric of focusing on development and growth as opposed to materialism. This can also be explored through a dialectical lens.

## 2.2 Dialectics

According to Marx's philosophical thought, the existence of two conflicting sides and their integration is referred to as a dialectical movement. [<sup>12,13</sup>] China's desire or dream to achieve global economic dominance and compete with the USA can be seen as a materialistic pursuit.<sup>14</sup> As a socialist system, the market economy faces an issue with the state-controlled system, and Chinese leadership's statist approach poses challenges in addressing domestic and regional problems with large-scale economic projects like the BRI. The strategy, in this case, is a way to gradually increase influence regionally and globally while resolving issues at home. This signals how the BRI must be interpreted by scholars as a source of theoretical reflection on the broader Chinese diplomatic and governance framework, aligning it with the dialectical perspective. China is a socialist country within a capitalist economy that has adopted this unique strategy to manage the tussle between its statist governance and capitalist forces. (Milhaupt & Zheng, 2015). The Marxist dialectics<sup>15</sup> supports the view that this contradiction eventually leads to new forms of development (Gramsci, 1971). This new form of development in ASEAN is focused on

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<sup>11</sup> Pearson, M. M., Rithmire, M., & Tsai, K. (2023). The State and Capitalism in China. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356732>

<sup>12</sup> Marx, K. (1970). *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right.'*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, K. (1920). *The poverty of philosophy.* CH Kerr.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, T. L. (2015). The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower. *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, 45(1), 149–151.

<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-425914320/the-hundred-year-marathon-china-s-secret-strategy>

<sup>15</sup> Muravev, A. N., & Osipov, I. D. (2019). Dialectical materialism of Karl Marx and philosophy in the contemporary world. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University Philosophy and Conflict Studies*, 35(1), 70–82. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu17.2019.106>

issue-centricity.<sup>16</sup> Each player in this fragmented and polarized economic landscape is critically important for the theoretical study of Chinese diplomatic and economic strategies and international relations. While existing scholarship has examined China's growing influence on a historical basis, it lacks a contemporary analysis of its diplomatic and economic outreach.<sup>17</sup> The existing theories within the binary choices posed by the economic interdependence in regional governance point to connectivity-driven economic integration models creating dependence of developing nations on China.<sup>18</sup> Its approach through the BRI reflects a strategic effort and an outcome focused on establishing itself as a global player. This indicates that the BRI is not solely rooted in a Marxist or Neo-realist ideological foundation.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Overall approach in the study

The methodology was informed by the Research Questions (RQs) and discussions with Research fellows and young professionals from ASEAN countries.

**RQ1:** Why has the rebranding of the BRI led to a shift in its ideological discourse from Marxist to Neo-realist foundations

**RQ2:** How does the theoretical contradiction of BRI impact the broader Chinese global governance strategy

My research aimed to explore the theoretical contradictions of the BRI model within the evolving dynamics of Chinese diplomatic strategies. Using a mixed-methods approach with theory triangulation, I analyzed China's global engagement and dialogue in recent years. Leveraging the connections I made as the Impact Manager at ASEAN Youth Organization, I conducted informal interviews with students and young professionals from across 10 ASEAN countries. The local insights from the participants enabled me to understand the contemporary perceptions of the BRI and link the intent with its application.

#### 3.2 Research Ethics

Participant names have not been included in this paper; instead, their designations and organizational affiliations are mentioned. In certain sections, participant opinions have been integrated to inform and support my analysis on the subject. In an online setting, the participants from ASEAN countries engaged in casual discussions providing in-depth insights into social understanding and public perception of the BRI.

<sup>16</sup> Arase, D., & De Medeiros Carvalho, P. M. a. R. (2022). The Belt and Road Initiative in Asia, Africa, and Europe. In Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156246>

<sup>17</sup> Acharya, A., & Mishra, R. (2018). East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 40(1), 170–172. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs40-11>

<sup>18</sup> Di Mauro, F., Di Mauro, F., Stark, J., Dees, S., Dees, S., Bussière, M., Athukorala, P., Geishecker, I., Anderton, R., & Vansteenkiste, I. (2009). Globalisation, Regionalism and Economic Interdependence. In

Cambridge University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511576065>

### 3.3 Limitations

Due to funding and schedule limitations, fieldwork could not be conducted for this study. Thus, the participants in this study were less inclined to schedule a video call or respond via email. The online setting can make communication impersonal and difficult to interpret in terms of body language. However, familiarity with the participants made them more comfortable and made the questions more relevant to their expertise/interests. In the scope of this work, I could not further delve into the geo-economic explanations of the BRI and Global Governance Initiatives of China.

## 4. Findings and Conclusion

The questions in the scholarly discourse are regarding the correct theoretical justification for the BRI. Whether the BRI is based on Marxist, Neo-realist, Capitalist, or Neo-Marxist theoretical foundations is the core theme of the scholarly debate. From a neo-realist perspective, the BRI reflects a statist pragmatic model that maximizes China's economic influence to achieve its strategic goals. From a Marxist perspective, the BRI represents a practical application of the Marxist vision for Human liberation, focusing on community for a shared future and Global civilization. In contrast, the capitalist perspective suggests that the BRI exploits global resources, prioritizes global expansion, and reproduces the socio-economic structures perpetuating capitalism. The contested nature and varying perspectives indicate that it cannot be understood through a single theoretical framework. It embodies a statist, capitalist approach and Marxist explanations. Thus, exploring the end goal of these frameworks is essential to understanding the foundations of the BRI. In Marxist theory, the end goal is to overthrow capitalism and establish a socialist revolution, which does not align with the objectives of this initiative. Concerning efficacy, bringing a socialist revolution in developing nations is also impractical. The neo-realist school of thought propounded by Waltz and Mearsheimer focuses on security and survival in an anarchic model, which again does not accurately support the vision of BRI China. While the primary objectives of the BRI align with the capitalist framework - Economic growth, development, and wealth creation, the broader narrative points to the unique Chinese governance model. The meta-narratives and revamping strategies indicate a mix of capitalist framework with Marxist principles, indicating how China is evolving its approach.

### 4.1 Future Work

In the scope of this research, I plan to go beyond the descriptive analysis of previous researchers and revise the methodology to include geo-economic explanations. I chose to explore the efficacy of the Chinese meta-narrative on potential solutions and mediation to global issues with its Chinese characteristics; however, other insights could be potentially developed in future studies. For example, with the Trump 2.0 era, friction in China relations, and ASEAN's growing strategic footprint, the new posture of the US administration puts the Indo-Pacific Asia region in a quandary. Given that these powers share enduring economic and security interests with an increase in distrust against the US, how the dynamic plays out will be crucial for regional and global order. However, these analyses often miss a theoretically informed justification of the variations in its strategy due to ASEAN in the regional order.

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<sup>19</sup> Houlden, G., & Hong, N. (2018). Maritime Order and the Law in East Asia. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203710555>



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