

Trade, Threat and Transformation of World Order: A Review of *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*

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Since its announcement in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has engendered many debates over its motive, nature, feasibility and impact among scholars and policymakers alike. *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* by Bruno Maçães, former Europe minister of Portugal (2013-2015) and currently a non-resident senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in the US, represents one of the latest attempts to decipher the nature of the BRI and to discuss its global impact.² Published in 2019, it is a compact volume that links the BRI, which is primarily designed for promoting trade and economic development, with some of the most fundamental themes of contemporary world politics – the rise of China and the transformation of world order.

Starting from a geopolitical perspective, the author traces the economic and political ramifications of the BRI, as well as the initial responses from various countries involved in the initiative. The author's overall theme is that the BRI goes far beyond a commercial and economic project; rather, it is a Chinese grand strategy designed to overthrow the American-led post-war liberal world order.³ Maçães compares China to Victorian Britain, claiming that it has a dependence on imported commodities and export markets similar to that of nineteenth-century Britain but without an empire.⁴ The ultimate motivation of the BRI is to create a new world order with Eurasia at the centre and China as the single hegemon, threatening and eventually replacing the maritime world order of Pax Americana. Drawing on the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang's interpretation of the traditional Chinese *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven) order, the author alleges that the new Chinese world order, as promoted by the BRI, will be

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² Bruno Maçães, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, London: Hurst & Company, 2018, 228pp, £20.00 (hardback). £11.99 (paperback, 2020).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

a revival of the tributary system based on ‘dependency and respect for those that are more powerful’, which is ‘antithetical to Western values’.⁵

Behind such an assessment of the BRI is the hardly valid theory of the Thucydides’s Trap, which was proposed by Graham Allison and readily accepted by Mações.⁶ It claims that a war between a rising power and an existing power is destined; therefore, a confrontation between China and the US is ineluctable. According to Mações, the BRI, as a manifestation of the Chinese ambition, signifies the ‘transformation of China from a regional into a global power’.⁷ However, both the Thucydides’s Trap and its application to Chinese politics are questionable. As the eminent classicist Donald Kagan has pointed out, the rise of Athens was not the major factor contributing to the Peloponnesian War, and the Spartans simply did not desire to wage war.⁸ It is even more erroneous to apply a highly questionable model universally and assume that all actors act alike in all ages. The relatively peaceful power transition between Britain and the US during the Second World War, out of which the post-war world order was born, shows the weakness of such a generalisation. Advancements in transportation and communication technology and economic globalisation have made interdependence a defining feature of our age, which is fundamentally different from the nineteenth century, when geopolitical theories were first proposed. The nineteenth-century British colonies were not self-contained, and their relations to Britain were, as characterised by the panegyrist of the British Empire John Robert Seeley, like limbs to ‘a heart and brain’.⁹ In contrast, the states along the Belt and Road and China are independent states, which decide whether, under what conditions, in what form and to what extent cooperation should proceed by negotiation. Furthermore, it is inappropriate for the author to either take an oversimplified view of the manifold Chinese conceptions of world order, which possess a certain degree of pragmatism, flexibility and dynamism, or to assume one scholar’s theorisation of the *Tianxia* worldview to be the official view of the Chinese government.

Most fundamentally, instead of being an outsider and challenger to the post-war world order as the author suggests, China, as a major ally in the Second World War, was among the original builders of the post-war world order and the founding members of

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books, 2017; Bruno Mações, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, p. 8.

⁷ Bruno Mações, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, p. 23.

⁸ Arthur Waldron, ‘There is No Thucydides Trap’, *Supchina*, 12 June 2017, available at: <https://supchina.com/2017/06/12/no-thucydides-trap/>, accessed 15 April 2020.

⁹ John Robert Seeley ‘Introduction’ to *Her Majesty’s Colonies*, London: William Clowes and Sons, 1886, p. xxiii. Quoted in Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 87.

its cornerstone – the United Nations. In the past few decades, as the author also acknowledges but fails to elaborate,¹⁰ China has become one of the major beneficiaries of the post-war world order. While the US has been asserting the principle of ‘America First’ and withdrawing from international responsibilities, China is a steady force buttressing the post-war world order by reaffirming support for free trade, globalisation and international institutions. It is against this backdrop that the BRI was initiated. The primary purpose of the BRI is economic development. If it were politically and strategically oriented, it is difficult to explain why the BRI had initially been perceived with ambivalence and dismissed as unworkable for years in the US before the Trump administration took power in 2017 and categorised it as a direct challenge to the American primacy.¹¹ With heavy reliance on sources in non-Chinese languages and insufficient references to Chinese sources, the author has not fully exposed the complexity of the BRI, especially the intersections between the BRI and current regional and international mechanisms and the positive effects that result from those intersections. For example, the BRI is connected with regional frameworks, such as the ‘17+1’ mechanism between Central and Eastern European countries and China.¹² It also has potential synergies with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda launched by the United Nations in 2015, serving not only as an engine of trade and economic growth but also as a promoter of economic, environmental and social sustainability.¹³ The UNDP Resident Representative in China Agi Veres, has opined that the BRI could serve as ‘a wonderful accelerator to achieve the sustainable goals’.¹⁴

¹⁰ Bruno Mações, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, p. 177.

¹¹ Alek Chance, with an introduction by Alidad Mafinezam, ‘American Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Sources of Concern, Possibilities for US-China Cooperation’, Institute for China-America Studies, Washington, DC, November 2016, p. 4, available at: <https://chinaus-icas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/American-Perspectives-on-the-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>, accessed 25 April 2020; Lanxin Xiang, ‘Asia-Pacific’, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2019, p. 177.

¹² Bedrich Kopecky and Sun Chao, ‘The Heaviness of Czech—Interview with Bedrich Kopecky, Ambassador of Czech to China’, in Sun Chao, *New Order: Ambassadors’ Interviews on the ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative*, Beijing: China Development Press, 2018, p. 160.

¹³ Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China and United Nations Development Programme in China, ‘Report on Fostering Sustainable Development through Chinese Overseas Economic and Trade Cooperation Zones along the Belt and Road’, April 2019, available at: [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-BRI-2019%20COCZ%20Report%20\(EN\).pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-BRI-2019%20COCZ%20Report%20(EN).pdf), accessed 5 April 2020.

¹⁴ Agi Veres, ‘Belt and Road has the Potential to Be a New Way of Global Governance and Multi-lateral Engagement’, in Sun Chao, ed., *Ambassadors’ Views on the Belt and Road Initiative*, Beijing: CITIC Press, 2020, p. 190.

The underlying problem of the book is its adoption of the conventional European approach to order that considers peoples and states to be inherently competitive,¹⁵ and of the orthodox binary view of world order that envisages either unavoidable conflict or co-optation.¹⁶ The misunderstanding of the nature of world order leads to a misprediction of its major challenges. As dictated by the Allied powers in the Second World War, the post-war world order is a compromise between liberalism and realism. It has retained elements of hierarchical order, depending on big powers to maintain world peace while rendering many other states *de facto* less equal. Horizontally, it has preserved elements of class, racial and gender inequality that the British imperial order entailed, though it has the aspiration to be an inclusive, liberal and democratic order. To solve the structural problems and to purge the imperial elements, there have been forces to reform the post-war world order since the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, among which the BRI is neither the only one nor the earliest one. The disastrous Coronavirus pandemic, which has led to the loss of lives, interruption of international transportation, curtailment of trade, and a surge of the unemployment rate, is a catalyst for exacerbating multifarious problems of the post-war world order, such as the inefficiency of international governance, the unchecked nationalism, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The BRI, some of whose projects have been affected or even halted during the pandemic, is not among the causes of these long-term and deep-seated problems. As an open and loosely defined scheme, the BRI is upholding the existing world order while incrementally transforming it by focusing on economic development and empowerment of less-developed areas, in an environment where conflict and adaption coexist.

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, Penguin Books, 2015, p. 361.

¹⁶ Nana de Graaff, Tobias ten Brink and Inderjeet Parmar, 'China's Rise in a Liberal World Order in Transition – Introduction to the FORUM', *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2020, p. 193.