

***China's Maritime Silk Road: Advancing Global Development?* By Gerald Chan. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020. Hardcover: 175pp.**

This book is a companion volume to Chan's previous work on the land-centric elements (the "Belt") of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The "Road" refers to the maritime parts of the BRI, China's major foreign policy programme for international economic engagement and political influence building. The book's structure comprises two brief introductory chapters, a theoretical framework chapter, followed by three chapters addressing each of the three main routes planned for the "Road": the route to the west, linking China to Europe and Africa via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean; the route south via Southeast Asia to Oceania; and the route north to Europe and North America via the Arctic Ocean. This is followed by a chapter on how China protects its interests along the maritime silk road, and a conclusion. The latter is not really a conclusion at all, but instead introduces two new elements: the debate over China's alleged "debt-trap" diplomacy, and the technological aspects of strategic competition—Beijing's so-called "digital silk road". The latter elements seem out of place and, while valid aspects of the broader BRI debate, are not well situated or linked to the book's intended maritime focus.

Chapter Two establishes both that the "Road" is about building maritime connectivity and the book's focus is on port developments under the BRI. Curiously, although Chan notes two relevant Chinese policy documents, including one dealing specifically with maritime cooperation under the BRI, there is no extended treatment of them. The chapter sets out a broad overview of China's investments in foreign ports and logistics operations. In the framework chapter, Chan establishes his concept of "geo-developmentalism" as a means of "drawing more directly on Chinese perspectives and experiences" to better understand and explain the meaning of the BRI. In doing so, he argues that "geo-developmentalism" is in competition with Western "neo-liberalism" for political-economic influence and opportunities throughout the developing world (p. 27). He argues that this model of Chinese authoritarian state-directed capitalism—otherwise known as the so-called "Beijing consensus", a term not used in the book—not only challenges the neo-liberal model of economic development but also the liberal international order itself (p. 30); but somewhat incongruously, also that that challenge is inadvertent (pp. 156–57).

Chan stresses that he seeks to “go beyond” standard Western geopolitical analyses (p. 27), but the book is implicitly geopolitical, frequently employing terms such as “balance of power”, albeit without explanation or elaboration. The author has a predilection for neologism via the employment of prefixes. Thus, in addition to his master concept, he introduces us to “neo-transnationalism”, “neo-globalisation”, “neo-Westphalian” order, while neo-functionalism becomes “geo-neo-functionalism”. He also introduces us to a new geopolitical moniker—“Eurasifrica”. None of this is particularly enlightening and smacks of a scholar trying too hard to impress his readers with conceptual originality. Perhaps economic aspects of the BRI phenomenon might more simply have been explained by the generic mutual benefits of trade, investment and market access, which has made dealing with China so financially attractive for so many countries. What sets the BRI apart, though, is the geopolitical ambition underpinning what Exeter University historian Jeremy Black has termed China’s new “informal empire”; but such ideas are not explicitly explored by Chan. Further, there is no sense of historical context or ideological antecedents: possible historical congruities between authoritarian China’s “geo-developmentalism” and the 1920s developmental nationalism both of Leninist thought and Italian Fascism might have proven edifying.

Beyond Chan’s tenuous theorizing, there are four other major problems with the book. First, it is not sufficiently maritime, often meandering discursively into more generic BRI issues or non-maritime projects. Given the extensive discussion of the digital silk road, for example, it would have been reasonable to expect a more detailed investigation of China’s fibre-optic submarine cable construction along the maritime silk road.

Second, while two of the routes pass through Southeast Asia, there is almost no discussion of BRI maritime developments in the region. Instead, the book chooses to focus on the ports of Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, Piraeus; and Oceania. Despite enticingly introducing elements such as China’s development of its south-eastern coastal region, including Hainan Province, to improve connectivity with Southeast Asian ports, no elaboration of actual links is made. Brief mention of attempts to reduce reliance on the Straits of Malacca by building pipelines through Myanmar, the complications of the South China Sea disputes for the BRI, or the intriguing plans to use Chinese private security companies to protect BRI projects in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, similarly are only cursory. The north route chapter also ignores the potential negative impacts

for Southeast Asia, particularly for Singapore, if more vessels start to ply the Northern Sea Route.

Third, despite a preference for geoeconomic rather than geopolitical approaches, geopolitical and strategic implications inhere in the BRI. Chan's preference for telling the maritime silk road story from a Chinese developmental perspective may have validity, but is often contradicted with constant references to geopolitical factors; as if he does not want to admit the true confluence of economic and strategic agendas. In this, his use of the Chinese perspective tends to be uncritical, and discussion of strategic factors such as China's naval power, superficial.

Fourth, superficiality is a general issue with the book. Research has been conducted broadly rather than in depth, with excessive use of online news reports instead of often easily available primary source material and quality secondary sources. One suspects that a more satisfactory book might have eventuated if Chan's two volumes had been combined into one, but that would not necessarily have cured the theoretical and analytical shortcomings.

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