

***Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative.* Edited by Florian Schneider. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Hardcover: 350pp.**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has received substantial scholarly attention since its inception in 2013. Many studies have naturally approached the BRI from a Chinese perspective, through economic, political or geostrategic lenses. BRI projects, however, are foreign policy instruments which rely on bilateral or even multilateral collaboration, rather than on the will of Beijing alone. China is, furthermore, not a monolithic actor. Agency is thus an important element that should be considered in BRI studies.

In *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Florian Schneider and the contributors to this edited volume apply the concept of agency to their examination of the various actors involved in BRI projects worldwide. Considerable attention is devoted to seven Southeast Asian countries. In the section on local actors, Chapter Eight studies the Chinese high-speed rail (HSR) project in Indonesia, Chapter Nine focuses on the legitimacy of ruling elites and agency in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand, while Chapter Ten examines China's formal and informal models for implementing BRI projects in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Chapter Eight, while centred on the Jakarta-Bandung HSR, also comprehensively examines Indonesia-China relations as a whole. Frans-Paul van der Putten and Mirela Petkova note that Indonesia's history, demographics, domestic politics and economics, foreign relations and security concerns have shaped how BRI projects are conducted in Indonesia. Foreign investment in Indonesia, while contributing to the country's economic growth, are still beholden to Jakarta's primary concern: safeguarding the country's sovereignty. Indonesia has thus forbidden China from including any Indonesian ports in the BRI and has placed a ceiling on foreign ownership in the transport sector (pp. 200, 202, 209). These concerns can be attributed to negative perceptions of China, Indonesia's colonial past and its non-aligned foreign policy. China has been mindful of these sensitivities and has, for example, refrained from sending Chinese labourers to work on BRI projects in Indonesia (pp. 205–6). As a result, Beijing's geopolitical influence in Indonesia is marginal. Some important issues, such as land development, land acquisition and other bilateral cooperation issues associated with the HSR project are not extensively examined, though this can be attributed to space

constraints. Overall, however, the authors have been successful in examining the nuances of China's BRI projects in Indonesia.

Cheng-Chwee Kuik explores the relationship between domestic political structures and BRI projects through three case studies in Chapter Nine. Assessing BRI projects in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand using the concept of power diffusion, Kuik examines the respective countries' preferences for development-centred performance legitimation, particularistic and procedural legitimation (pp. 221–22). The political systems of these three countries—with distinct levels of power diffusion—provide an illuminating comparison: more power diffusion leads to the greater inter-elite competition which causes changes or even the cancellation of BRI projects (p. 239). In addition to its comparative study, Kuik's chapter also includes detailed analysis of the dynamics among the three host countries and China with regard to their respective BRI projects. A minor quibble is the author's assertion that the Sino-Lao railway will be the first and only modern rail line directly linking Southeast Asia with China (p. 223)—a standard gauge (1.435 metres) rail line between northern Vietnam and China has been operating since the mid-1960s, with regular upgrades.

In Chapter Ten, Matt Ferchen discusses BRI projects in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam in relation to China's two different models for implementing these projects. The chapter asserts that the informal model comprises various types of non-state actors, in contrast to the prototypical one led by state actors (pp. 247–50). The informal model is used to examine casinos in Cambodia, a coal-fired power plant in Vietnam and border traders in Myanmar. In addition, Ferchen also examines China's "conventional" BRI projects in the three countries, such as the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia, the Hanoi subway in Vietnam and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (pp. 251–59). A single chapter may be too short to adequately explore several important subjects, and thus an elaboration of the informal examples is lacking. Similarly, the linkage between the two models in these three countries could have been analysed in more depth. China's gambling operations in the Philippines would have provided a useful comparison with Cambodia, although this would have been difficult due to space constraints. Despite these limitations, Ferchen's chapter sheds light on this rare facet of China models for BRI implementation and is a useful addition to studies of the BRI.

In sum, *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative* advances the BRI research agenda, from planning to execution,

provider to receivers, and from monolithic states to various types of actors. The three chapters on Southeast Asia demonstrate the diversity in states' interactions with China with regard to the BRI. As countries are often treated monolithically (p. 17), Southeast Asia is often generalized as a single actor or area in the larger geopolitical picture. The four authors thus take different approaches to remind us of this complicated reality. This awareness is necessary for understanding the dynamics between China and the countries which joust for BRI projects.

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