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Eclipsing US Influence in Southeast Asia: China's Belt and Road Initiative

Reynan C. Afan
Harvard Extension School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
Philippine Military Academy, Baguio City, Philippines

Author Email: reynancafan@gmail.com

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Abstract. The BRI is a foundational pillar in China's aspiration for national rejuvenation through remaking the ancient 'silk road' into maritime, land, and cyber roads. The paper aims to outline China's purposes and objectives in the BRI in Southeast Asia, the interplay of domestic needs of selected Southeast Asian countries with the allure of the BRI, and the dynamics of these economic-political relationships vis-à-vis the interests of China and the United States in the region. It starts with the claim that, geographically, maintaining a friendly neighbor policy or 'periphery diplomacy' will help secure China's borders and solidify the BRI maritime and land silk roads. In many instances, the dynamics of international political economy or the intertwining relationship of economics and politics come into play. On the other side, domestic politics also affects decision-making on BRI projects. Different contexts show the dynamics of domestic politics and BRI projects. While some praised the intention and promises of the BRI, especially in hitting the development needs of the target countries, particular evidence shows that its portrayed vigor and benevolence to launch its equivalent of a Marshall plan to rehabilitate and aid Southeast Asian countries have encountered various issues on the projects per se and their long-term implications. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the selected Southeast countries' BRI engagement was due to domestic concerns for local socio-economic needs. The evidence also suggests that China intends to outcompete the United States in terms of being the region's leading provider of economic development. As a result, China may stand to dislodge US influence in the region through the continuous improvement of the BRI.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); ASEAN; China; Geopolitics; US-China strategic competition.

1.0 Introduction

The causes and impacts of China's BRI engagements are varied and complicated. The works of Kuik (2021) and Yu (2017) call for a deeper investigation of the demand and supply of the BRI. In the many countries that have started their BRI projects, certain projects experienced issues of delays, labor-relation problems, challenges from local communities and environmental groups, issues on corruption, issues on debt traps, and doubts about the larger intentions of China on target countries (Cox, 2018; Cichocka & Mitchell; 2024). Certain levels of distrust towards Chinese investments brought about by BRI can be seen across different sectors of society (McBride, 2023; Russel et al., 2020). The distrust takes its root on both sides of the spectrum wherein one side was about local politicians intending to legitimize their stay in their positions and thus resorting to external loan agreements, and on the other side, how the BRI project may bankrupt the government (Wemer, 2023; Rabena, 2018). It is also observable that some BRI projects have received appreciation and proper management because the absorptive capacity and the necessary systems to protect the interests of the receiving country are institutionalized such that transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness are felt by all (Overland & Vakulchuk, 2020; Tong & Kong, 2018). Nonetheless, using considering the internal dynamics and responses of the Southeast Asian countries, the BRI will likely increase China's influence in the region (Gong, 2019).

2.0 Methodology

A thorough literature review was conducted using reputable journal articles, books, government documents, and policy statements from national leaders. This study adhered to the protocols and standards set forth by this journal.

3.0 Results and Discussion

China's National Development and Reform Commission is the primary body that oversees the BRI. Together with the other ministries and agencies of China, the BRI intends to open and sustain six economic corridors, namely, the Eurasia land bridge covering Europe Kazakhstan and Russia; China, Mongolia, Russia corridor; China, Central Asia, West Asia Corridor; China Indochina peninsula corridor; China Pakistan corridor and China, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar corridor. It must be clarified hereon that China decides what constitutes a BRI project and what does not.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia is also home to the vital sea lanes of communication where a sizeable chunk of the world's goods passes through. The region is also rich with critical minerals and other raw materials that can support China's development of many emerging technologies. More than sixty percent of Chinese people living outside China live in Southeast Asia. The BRI projects China as the hub for economic development, where countries can avail themselves of infrastructure and other economic development projects. This economic move is part of its larger scheme of China's power projection. In many instances, the dynamics of international political economy or the intertwining relationship of economics and politics come into play.

As China attempts to connect the world to itself, BRI is funded by various Chinese financial institutions that enjoy preferential terms and rates in supporting BRI projects. China also has state-owned enterprises that play a big role in implementing the BRI. Arguably, another source that finances the BRI projects is the debt financing of other countries to China. Domestically, the BRI is a welcome opportunity for its steel, cement, glass, and other construction industries to include their manpower and technical services and expand their reach to Southeast Asia. Along with these, the Chinese government will enjoy popularity among its people as it provides local industries avenues to venture outwards, secures its borders, and strengthens its military (Cavanna, 2019). The Asian Development Bank estimates that developing countries in Asia need 26 trillion dollars to keep their economies moving forward. As a response, BRI countries have agreed to one trillion dollars with China in the first ten years of the BRI implementation. Thus, in itself, BRI is addressing a global investment deficit. As of 2020, BRI recipient countries form at least thirty percent of the world's total General Domestic Product and at least fifty percent of the world's population.

Historically, these countries have proven to be pragmatic in many aspects. After all, the so-called Asian values have emerged from this testing landscape where, while they have embraced democracy, for instance, they have interpreted and shaped it according to the specific contexts and needs of their localities. Singapore is a prime example of this as it grappled to survive after it gained its independence in 1965. The institution of the Association of Southeast Asians, established in 1964, also is a lasting example of the people's pragmatism. After the Second World War and the looming Cold War, the former colonial territories faced problems of national unity, inefficient government systems, weak economies, and internal and external security issues, they gathered to form a coalition to tell the world and the major powers on their aspiration to be a region of peace, stability, and development.

Status of the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asian countries

Philippines

Any assessment of the BRI in the Philippines is colored by the long history of China on Philippine soil and the irresponsible behavior of China in the West Philippine Sea. For centuries, similar to the rest of Southeast Asia, the Philippines has been a home to many Chinese traders. The most prominent economic blocs in the Philippines are owned by Filipino-Chinese citizens. The arrival of the BRI brought the opportunity to further boost the infrastructure development of the country in the form of seaports, airports, roads, bridges, and railway projects (Rabena, 2018). The highest economic interaction between Beijing and Manila was during the Duterte administration, which expanded to different foreign direct investments covering energy, telecommunications, real estate, finances, and others. However, other sources also note the rise of illicit activities through economic engagements.

There is also a growing concern about a silent creeping proliferation of illegal online gaming operations hidden in different locations in the country. Security analysts are disturbed by the hidden activities and the chosen locations of these illegal facilities, as some appear to be adjacent to or surround security infrastructures. Some sources also claim that China has, through these economic engagements, steadily influenced decision-makers in the security sector. The Kaliwa dam project saw backlash for environmental issues as well as no consultation with stakeholders. Other projects saw issues with the lack of accommodation for the local labor force. Chinese involvement in the Sangley airport, which is strategically located near major naval and air bases and the nation's capital, as well as the share in handling the National Power Grid Corporation, remains controversial.

Coupled with the growing Filipino distrust of the Chinese government over their illegal activities and the suspicion of such a connection with the BRI, the BRI has seen significant implementation issues (De Castro, 2019). Likewise, the Marcos administration has poured cold water over the BRI activities and has thus canceled most, if not all, of them. However, other analysts also call for sobriety and prudence in not engaging with China and reaping the benefits of the BRI, as the country needs capital to sustain its economy. Overall, the Philippines has received the BRI projects due to the international attention emphasizing the disadvantages experienced by other countries. This is coupled with the growing national agitation against China's aggressive and violent actions in the West Philippine Sea that are endangering both government personnel in their vessels and depriving Filipino fisherfolks of their traditional fishing grounds (Chao, 2024).

Singapore

Singapore has had a long, formal, friendly economic relationship with China since 1990. Deng Xiao Ping, who opened the Chinese economy and heavily but gradually reformed China after the misgivings of Mao's administration, was very impressed in visiting the then Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew in 1978. Other authors also note that assessing BRI engagements in Singapore must not be wholly viewed from a geopolitical lens but from a domestic one, as the ruling People's Action Party practices a pragmatic approach to managing the Singaporean economy (Chan, 2021). The paper of Liu, Fan, and Lim (2021) argues that Singapore has a peculiar advantage due to the continuous development of its governance systems as the small city-state has been ruled by one party since its establishment. This 'network state' has made the government an effective hub to connect, collaborate, and respond to government leaders, bureaucrats, and other stakeholders.

This institutionalized 'network state' has several nodes of power to optimize the BRI to favor both China and the national interests of Singapore. In some ways, this puts Singapore in an advantageous position on the BRI. To further capitalize on Singapore's ability to be a financial hub wherein it has capabilities to complement the BRI in terms of service for project development, firms for procurement and construction, service providers, and finance institutions, Chan (2019) suggests that Singapore may assist other countries who engage with the BRI to grow in policy and regulatory framework design, institutional capacity development and sustainable project structuring. In this manner, it can be assumed that issues such as corruption, unfair trade policy, unclear project development, and over-indebtedness are highly reduced given this more mature and articulate system in Singapore.

Malaysia

It must be noted that under Dr Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysia was one of the first countries to open its doors to China after the end of the Cold War. The example of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project funded by the Export-Import Bank of China involving forty tunnels and connecting Kelantan to Selangor elaborates how the BRI was an enticing opportunity as it promised to provide infrastructure development, connectivity, and job generation (Chinyong et al., 2021). Hence, the initial popularity of the BRI to some locals was due to its support for the construction of ports, airports, railways, and other infrastructures and its other economic aftereffects. However, after careful evaluation of the ECRL project, Jamil's paper (2023) observed how the project has been mired by corruption and debt issues. The defeat of Najib Razak in the 2018 general elections brought to the spotlight the unequal China deals related to the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad. Subsequently, it caused the cancellation of the ECRL project as it may push Malaysia into significant debt to China and be a puppet to do China's bidding (Yeoh, 2020).

However, even if state leaders such as Mahathir Mohamad have voiced serious concerns about the probability of debt traps caused by the BRI, the gains of political elites contribute to the continuation of BRI (Friedman & Bekele, 2022). One of the effects of Mahathir's criticism of the BRI allowed reflection on how Malaysia will likely continue the BRI engagement but derive better benefits apart from infrastructure projects that involve technology transfers, renewable energy, and artificial intelligence. In the same vein, besides the known geopolitical realities that China is asserting influence through the BRI, Malaysia's pragmatic approach in welcoming BRI, aside from the economic benefits for the nation, is also how the ruling business elites legitimize their position through such arrangements (Kluik, 2021). As such, Malaysia will continue to see the need to prioritize its economic plans sustained by all available support channels, including the BRI.

Indonesia

Like Malaysia, BRI projects in Indonesia are highlighted by the China Development Bank-funded Jakarta-Bandung national railway project as a major infrastructure development that started in 2016 and as a contribution to China's thrust to enhance connectivity in other countries. The project symbolizes the peculiar relationship between China and Indonesia. While overrun costs were incurred due to project delays, Indonesia showed its independence in shouldering the costs and, more importantly, scrutinizing the benefits of the details of the China offer, wherein the bidding competitor from Japan lost due to a lack of technology transfers and guarantees of the loan.

Aside from the Jakarta-Bandung national railway project, BRI projects include energy generation, smelters, and mineral mining. The China-Indonesia Morawali Industrial Park, conceived initially as a nickel, iron, and steel production facility, evolved into an essential nickel supplier for the electric vehicle industry. This massive park with 11 smelter facilities was funded by HSBC China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Bank of China, China Development Bank, and Export-Import Bank of China. As connected mines and coastal areas are affected, connected issues to this project are issues of air pollution, water pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and employment issues of location population. The historically pragmatic approach of Indonesia in balancing its political and economic national interests is aptly seen in how it engages with China. Like other authors, Riska (2024) has asserted the need to iron out policy concerns that will serve the interests of Indonesia but see the value for Indonesia to optimize the benefits that the BRI brings to the country.

Cambodia

The work of Cheang and Heng (2021) echoes the same picture found in many Southeast Asian economies but more importantly, paints the description of mainland Southeast Asia society as divided or categorized as elites with major conglomerates, middle class with civil society organizations, and local communities wherein the elites hugely accept the infusion of much capital in the country with the prospect of enlarging their businesses, the middle class with civil society organizations concerned about the probable debt traps and other uneven trade deals, and the local communities concerned with the long-term environmental impacts of BRI projects and the waves of Chinese laborers who will implement the BRI projects. The research of Loughlin and Grimsditch (2021) elucidates how the BRI has helped maintain the status quo of the power of the few as it simply enriched the elites in the country and sustained the large part of the population with low-income industries. What is clear in Cambodia is the need for foreign investments to jumpstart its economy, connect its industries and people, and have greater reach in foreign markets. The BRI is a tantalizing option for a country thirsty for stability, growth, and inclusive development.

Myanmar

Myanmar finds its place in the BRI as it is strategically connected to China on its land border and is a promising gateway for China towards the Indian Ocean. Initially, BRI offerings did not have a strong start in the country. However, after the West had cast any doubts, it suspended many engagements as well as placed several conditions on Myanmar in relation to the Rohingya crisis. BRI engagements with Myanmar were upbeat by 2017 (Mark et al., 2020). Like other countries, roads and railways formed the bulk of investments. As the country gradually transformed its socialist economy to be more open to attract investments and gain efficiency, large businesses comprised prominent families with usual military affiliations. Thus, BRI projects greatly benefitted the joint ventures of these family-owned businesses for construction projects.

In 2018, Myanmar became a signatory of the Memorandum of Agreement in building the India, Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar Economic Corridor covering more than seven hundred kilometers from Kunming to Yunnan province of China (Gyi, 2019). While there is skepticism about Chinese projects from the public, the reality of needing foreign capital is felt and accepted. This entry of BRI is another manifestation of how developing countries' reliance on foreign direct investment is more accommodating to Chinese offers, especially as they come with the perception that Chinese economic offers have no preconditions for governance and accountability (Zhang, 2022).

Vietnam

Hoa and Nguyen's paper (2021) spoke of the interesting relationship between China and Vietnam as a backdrop for the BRI projects. As the two countries have historical attachments and detachments, both see the strategic significance of their engagement for economic and politico-security purposes. This is manifested by the “two corridors, one belt” initiative that was proposed by Vietnam in 2005 to China. The idea was for the Guangxi of China with Quang Ninh Hai Phong of Vietnam and Yunnan of China with Lao Cai Hai Phong of Vietnam to develop economic corridors (Van Huy, 2020). Chinese projects are also seen with caution in Vietnam; the institutional mechanisms to scrutinize and vet projects are obvious and instructive on how Southeast Asian states will not always accept BRI projects hook, line, and sinker but with critical and interest-laden hands.

Of particular interest to China, Vietnam not only provides opportunities for economic benefits and security to its southern land border but is also an important and active actor against China's ten-dash line claim and its actions in the South China Sea. While there were many fruitful discussions between the leaders and representatives of both countries in praise of connectivity, economic integration, and collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese people, on the ground, BRI projects also encountered situations similar to other countries in the region, such as the suspicion of too much economic dependence to China, project infirmities in the form of overruns, delays and poor quality, possible effects in Vietnam’s territorial integrity issues with China and economic disparity with China’s cheaper production capability with that Vietnam. Thus, Nguyen's (2022) research on determining the opportunities and risks for Vietnam in the BRI saw security, political stability, and legal and regulatory risks as the highest considerations. However, unlike other mainland Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam’s relationship with China will be colored by its issue in the South China Sea. Thus, it can be surmised that Vietnam will place economic concerns within its national security policy (Dinh et al., 2024).

Thailand

For some observers, Thailand was one of the countries that pragmatically welcomed the BRI because of China’s position on Thailand after its 2014 coup, as China chose to respect the situation using its non-interference principle. While other projects cover special economic zones, tourism, education, and others, Thailand's most prominent and promising BRI project was the proposal for a high-speed railway project (Lu et al., 2018). This was funded by China’s Export-Import Bank and China Railway International Company Limited. Relatedly, during this time, competition with Japan on infrastructure projects came to the fore. An example was the railway project between Bangkok and Chiangmai, which initially engaged with Japan but was eventually won by China. By 2015, Japan introduced its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure for Asia as evidence of how Japan must consolidate and reintroduce its brand as a reliable partner for infrastructure support hubs.

If this railway project is the rallying symbol for the BRI engagement, various sectors can see mixed reactions. Some view China’s offer with suspicion ranging from its larger scheme to dominate the region, the engagement as a debt trap, and the general mistrust towards the quality of Chinese technology or lack thereof (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2021). However, other analysts also note domestic issues are to blame for the lack or delay in implementing the projects due to bureaucratic anomalies and political party dynamics inside Thailand. Like other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand will balance these domestic political considerations and the potential of the BRI to pursue its various development objectives.

Laos
A similar picture shows how China is projecting itself as a regional investor and reliable donor in the landlocked country of Lao PDR (Vörös & Somsack, 2020). For China, a connectivity project linking Kunming in China to Vientiane of Laos will not only mean a transport hub, tourism opportunity, and logistics channel between the two countries but also a ready link to Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Like other observers in other countries, concerns over indebtedness, environmental risks, chaotic timelines in the construction process, and lack of transparency in decision-making in China are expressed, as how much economic dependence may open the door for undue influence on China. Thus, analysts suggest a more thorough, multi-faceted, and even a cultural understanding of Chinese history to better comprehend the internal convulsions of the BRI as a continuing development (Jensen, 2022). However, like other countries in mainland Southeast Asia, Laos will most likely continue welcoming the BRI to support its much-needed external capital infusion to induce economic growth and contribute to the political stability in the country.

Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of the BRI
Development is always in everyone's best interest. Southeast Asia has a lot of investment needs in the transportation, health, education, and energy sectors. As the population grows, other related requirements for public good and social protection are needed. All these can only be supported by a robust economy. Following the triadic relationship of security, governance, and development, it is positive to foster ways and means for development issues to be addressed in every corner of the planet. Different theories suggest that a good economy, distributed wealth, and social protection decrease the risk of criminality and other forms of crime. Moreover, this increases the security of the country. Addressing development goals allows a country to contribute and commit resources to larger advocacies of global institutions and aid other countries in their other needs. Public goods like roads, mass transit systems, communication technologies platforms, and ports are vital to jumpstarting and sustaining growth.

While countries like Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and to some extent Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines are showing vibrant economies in the region, considerable investments are urgently needed to sustain their economies, attend to the welfare of their people, increase productivity and establish connectivity to the rest of the world. In turn, this will help boost a business climate, encourage more tourism, provide easy transfer of goods and people, and generate more opportunities for the people and revenues for the government. The thought of having a ready hand of support for open funding, technology, human resources, and services within competitive terms is a welcome opportunity that is hard to miss. China will optimize this channel if the US shows limited vigor and action in this aspect. It is also in the interest of the world to have a China that is not just willing to open its resources, expertise, and services to partner with other countries but also, along the way, open to inquiries, suggestions, and clamors for improving how it conducts trade with other countries. In doing this, it is hoped that China will take on its role as a responsible member of the international community.

However, several disadvantages for the US have also been deciphered. To understand China, one must consider things from its perspective, away from the Western view of the world. China runs on a different ideology, which is run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As such, its economy is first driven by political objectives. In the eyes of the CCP, national security comes first before other needs. Thus, all its economic endeavors, including the BRI, are superseded by its grand political plans for itself and the world. The BRI must be considered and approached as part of China's great national rejuvenation. The economic short and long-term benefits and the means to employ them will always consider security considerations. For instance, information on technology, people, movements, competencies, locations, and future settings is not only for commercial purposes but also forms part of the larger data of surveillance and forecasting. Acquired lands, technologies, access, and other assets have economic and military potential. These are the disadvantages of the BRI for the US. China views its economic power as its absolute and legitimate means to protect and enhance its political and security power where and when necessary.

For the receiving or client countries, the BRI also means China's assertion for alignment with China's views on many matters. Considering the internal dynamics of many local politicians in the region, the historical pragmatic approach of these countries, and their significant need for foreign direct investments, said countries will most likely accept and gradually work with China to polish the hick-ups of the deals. This may mean a constellation of countries maintaining a steady and deep economic and political relationship with China. While the prospect of these countries severing their ties with the US is nearly impossible soon, their pragmatism will mean substantial loss for US economic and political engagement in the region.

It is also important to understand that China's history has been instructive in its strategic patience. China views the world in hundreds and thousands of years. China views the US and the West as being short-sighted and easily distracted. On the side of China, its non-democratic political set-up has the advantage of continuity and stability in its planning. Its relentless pursuit as an entrepreneurial state is a monumental success that surprised many worldwide (Grillo & Nanetti, 2018). While other analysts have predicted the demise of Communist states due to their unsustainable ideology and impractical governance in a globalized world, China has surpassed these predictions and has evolved into a communist entrepreneurial state. It must also be remembered that many Southeast Asian countries have historically flirted with Communism in their recent pasts. Though many of these movements have been rendered irrelevant by the local population per se, and the US has contributed to their defeat during the Cold War, the alternative of a new and improved version that can create a middle may mean a comeback in these states. For its part, the US is viewed by China as having many weaknesses brought about by its internal contradictions. Its democratic philosophy and systems have rendered it unstable and vulnerable to influential groups. Hence, it is unable to sustain and maintain any strategic plan. As a world power shouldering all the world's ills, countless issues also burden it, and these distract it from focusing on any issue or place on the planet. Thus, it is perceived that Obama's pivot to Asia lacked the muscle to be perceived as a pivot. This vacuum of lack of focus and energy will be exploited by China through the BRI, whether in Obama's time or in the decades to come.

Short-term Implications

Having seen and studied the various aspects and issues of BRI projects in different countries, the impact of one to other projects in the region, and the overall impact of these on the global connectivity ambitions through the maritime and silk road, we judge that China will most probably adjust its priorities, review its procedures in approving projects and heavily explore on how to address the perception issues of the target countries. It is noteworthy that Nikkei Asia, in 2022, ranked the US and China as the ranking investors in the region with 73.4 billion dollars and 68.5 billion dollars, respectively, between 2018 and 2022.

China will continue the implementation of the BRI and expand it according to the needs of the country vis-à-vis its interests. For instance, it will continue the development of more railways for bullet trains and roads for the transportation of goods and people in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, as China shares land borders with them. Connecting them with China will still be in China's interest. Energy development will also rise as a significant BRI potential. Access to cheap and reliable energy is a concern for all countries aspiring to reach their industrial age. Southeast Asian countries will most likely engage with China in this respect regarding the development of traditional sources and emerging or non-traditional sources. BRI may develop coal plants, oil rigs, natural gas extraction, geothermal plants, dams, and solar panel farms. China will use this to access needed minerals in lithium battery manufacturing, nickel for semiconductors, and other minerals for many emerging technologies. Besides railways, maritime Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Timor Leste, and even other Pacific nations will most likely continue pursuing investments in airport and seaport development for trade, tourism, and movement of people.

Connectivity in cyberspace will exponentially grow as business, education, health, politics, and social existence are creating a hyperconnected world. Thus, developing and improving the intended digital Silk Road are also worth noting. As China is developing a competitor to the Global Positioning System in Pakistan, developing its other digital economies, such as the model of Alibaba company and the deployment of China Telecom and China Mobile, these technologies may soon rival what the US offers and aim to outcompete US' strategic advantage in this area. Connected to the digital silk world is the promising frontier of generative artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and other research that will spell innovations in health, agriculture, food, medicines, productivity, and general well-being. Connected to this are the security concerns of how these will be used for economic competition and plausible surveillance, espionage, and hacking purposes. More serious to this would be how the connection between China and Southeast Asian countries will not only be material but, in some ways, social and spiritual. Endless collaborations on countless fronts mean opportunities for familiarization and cross-cultural understanding that will address the trust deficit China suffers from.

Soon, the consequences of China's BRI in terms of creating corridors of connectivity will also mean future trade deals that may encompass trade blocs within BRI economies' geographical area. China may probably connect trading blocs located in different economic corridors. This means that even the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), touted as the largest economic bloc composing China, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN member states covering trade, investment, technical cooperation, dispute settlement, and e-commerce, may be eclipsed by a China that is a door to all other major and developing economies. On the part of the client countries of the BRI, while there is the prospect of development caused or aided by the BRI, the prospect of increasing the strengths of democratic institutions will still follow the "Asian democracy" model whereby said countries will borrow aspects of Western-style democracy and adopt them according to the peculiar cultural patterns of their countries (Neher, 2018). This means the prospect of BRI and the other entanglements from China will likely be entertained and engaged with by said countries and will be adjusted according to their situations.

Long-term Implications

China projects that many developing countries may gradually gravitate towards It. The BRI serves as one of the magnets that attract countries that may be weary of the political conditions provided by US and Western institutions like the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the like. Because of this perceived 'no strings attached' image of the BRI, it will likely attract more developing countries in need of external resource aid. More so, countries facing sanctions or restrictions from Western-affiliated countries and organizations will probably align themselves with China and its BRI. More disturbingly, this will continue the irrelevance of sanctions as a means of the US and the West as an instrument of foreign policy and compliance to international laws and norms as subject countries will aim to sanction-proof their economies. The soft power approach of China will amplify the BRI as the new Marshall Plan for Southeast Asia and the world. It may also be implied that there is a likelihood that while China is currently portraying itself as following the non-interference principle for inter and intra-state conflicts, there is a moderate likelihood for China to be a mediator for the peace process and conflict management in the future as it attempts to settle the region and continue its economic engagements.

Threats to US Interests in the Region?

As China expands the BRI projects from infrastructure to other projects, the US strategic interests in the region in business, politics, and security will be greatly affected. Southeast Asia has a growing population of more than 600 million people, and opportunities for economic engagement in various sectors are ripe for optimization. While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations notes that the US was its top investor of 37 billion dollars in 2022, China marched forward with 15 billion dollars in 2022. Hence, it is most likely that competition for the Southeast Asian market will continue to be intense and expand in competition in the realm of generative artificial intelligence, research, and general network connectivity.

As Southeast Asia hosts the vital ancient and contemporary sea lanes of communication connecting the Indian Ocean to the Yellow Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and the major factories of the world are in the peripherals of this region, US industry will be greatly affected by the close and unimpeded access of China to these markets. The flow and management of global supply chains will also be affected by the development of these economic corridors through the BRI. The maintenance and viability of US bases and security architecture in the region may also be questioned.

Similarly, the current US allies in the region, like India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, may find themselves in a conundrum as the Chinese maritime roads grow tighter in favor of China. Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other like-minded state actors will likely avail themselves of the BRI and probably be more emboldened in their actions as the economic consequences are diminished due to the BRI's benefits to their country. Diminishing here means a smaller scope of US trade and the presence, movement, initiative, and force of the US dollar versus the Chinese RMB.

Preserving the status quo for authoritarian regimes through BRI will mean states that will preserve patronage politics run by elites and a substantial number of populations that will remain subservient through meager salaries availed through low-income industries. This, in turn, lowers education and social protection levels and higher levels of tendencies for conflict economies, where some may be used for proxy wars. The BRI will also greatly affect ASEAN's future as an institution, as many member countries relate to it. The shape and form of ASEAN's independence and relationship with the US and the West will be transformed in the long run in favor of China if the BRI continues to improve and address the interests of the said countries and no competitive alternatives arrive.

In the realm of ideology, while others may note that ideology is dead, its ability to move emotions and legitimize regimes still exists. The US may fail to achieve its interests in the region if the narrative of democracy and its attendant values are not consistently, comprehensively, and practically understood, appreciated, and felt. The realities of domestic politics speak of politics of the stomach and short-term needs and not the long-term overhauling of the social structures. The pragmatism of people in developing countries may bite the bullet or not mind the source of funds, whether from democratic capitalist or socialist-capitalist hands if these hands bring 'food' to the table. This is also reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping's words that it does not matter whether the cat is black or white if it catches the mice. Moreover, for China's BRI, socialism or its recent Chinese nationalist version, along with its attendant values, may have a renewed taste for some.

4.0 Conclusion

China views its BRI as a major foreign policy tool for Southeast Asia as it supports its domestic stability and economic security and enhances its economic and military potential. More so, like its Southeast Asian counterparts' domestic political needs for greater legitimacy, the BRI adds to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party to continue its reign in China. The study then proves that all foreign policies have domestic inspirations. To a certain extent, Southeast Asian countries will all be independent in how they will accept BRI projects due to their respective domestic political situations and national interests. With this, China will continue to refine its approaches and methods in the BRI vis-à-vis the individual situations of the countries and perceived setbacks to increase its regional politico-economic status. However, the internal weaknesses of corruption, in-party politics, and adherence to Chinese companies' international trade standards and practices must be addressed to do this. In this regard, China will compete with US influence in the region through the BRI. Thus, BRI will remain an important part of the economic agenda of most Southeast Asian countries in supporting their infrastructure and connectivity demands despite the perceived and proven disadvantages. However, more research can be conducted on whether China can displace the US in the different economic corridors, land, maritime, and digital routes.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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9.0 References

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