

The Belt and Road Initiative: China's Imperialist Project?

Viktor Meczner¹

Nikola M. Noršić²

Abstract

This article tries to explore the connection between Hannah Arendt's theory of imperialism and China's contemporary geopolitical and economic positioning in the world. Specifically, an attempt is made to see how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China's biggest economic project yet – is connected to Arendt's nuanced understanding of imperialism, presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The thesis statement is that BRI is an imperialist project, insofar as it helps both China's domestic economy (by strengthening its middle class), as well as China's increasing global influence. In Arendt's terms, the imperialist nature of BRI comes from the fact that China does not only have a surplus of capital but also a surplus of people, both of which necessitate economic expansion which can best be achieved through a project such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

Key Words

Hannah Arendt, Imperialism, China, Belt and Road Initiative, The Origins of Totalitarianism

¹ Viktor Meczner student je četvrte godine preddiplomskog studija politologije na Fakultetu političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Kontakt: mecznerviktor@gmail.com.

² Nikola M. Noršić student je četvrte godine preddiplomskog studija politologije na Fakultetu političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Kontakt: norsicnikola@gmail.com.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to interpret China's modern geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy by looking at it through the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory of imperialism. More precisely, the aim is to make a case for the imperialist nature of China's agenda by analysing one of its key projects – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although this specific thesis might sound obscure and surprising to some, the topic of China's increasing role in the contemporary international system is surely not surprising to anyone. In other words, it is almost common knowledge that China, along with the USA, plays a crucial role in the bipolar international system that we have today. Other than that, we now have to account for the looming economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the international tensions that these consequences will surely bring about. Given this, and if we also consider *where* the pandemic actually started, the topic of this article seems as relevant as ever.

The world shaken up by the pandemic and its consequences is the world in which power relations between countries are fluid and subject to change. This post-pandemic context is a perfect opportunity for a country with a carefully considered plan to make use of this fluidity of power. In other words, this context is a perfect one for China to assert its global dominance. With that in mind, the analysis presented in this article, that is to say the analysis of China's most ambitious project yet, might give us some clue as to how the future of international relations will look like. Other than its possibly predictive power, we hope that this article spikes further research interest in a country that emperor Napoleon Bonaparte allegedly once referred to as a Sleeping Giant. Having said that, the structure of this article is as follows. In the first section, we explain Arendt's notion of imperialism, its history, and the way in which we connect Arendt's theory to our argument. Second section explains the reasons for choosing BRI as the main subject of our analysis, and it gives a brief overview of what BRI is and how it is perceived by the Chinese. The third section explores domestic aspects of BRI for China and its economy, whereas the fourth and final section delves deeper into regional and global aspirations of China and their connection to BRI. With all that said, let us now examine Arendt's theory of imperialism.

Imperialism through the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory

Imperialism is a process where one state establishes power and domination, formal or informal, over the powerless state(s). Modern imperialism was founded when the process of industrialization started to

give immense profits and when the state's economy could not sustain the need for perpetual growth (Arendt, 1979: 147-148). Arendt comes by her definition of imperialism by analysing the process of political expansion of European nation-states to Africa, primarily because of the lack of their economic expansion. National borders, she emphasizes, were no longer enough to support the need for economic prosperity and growth. So, what happened as a result? The consequence was that the bourgeoisie had to take political power to further expand economically:

“Imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion. The bourgeoisie turned to politics out of economic necessity; for if it did not want to give up the capitalist system whose inherent law is constant economic growth, it had to impose this law upon its home governments and to proclaim expansion to be an ultimate political goal of foreign policy” (Arendt, 1979: 126).

Therefore, the logic behind how the bourgeoisie entered politics was: if we do not have enough economic prosperity, we will fall; if we fall, the whole nation-state falls. This, it seems, was a necessity for the survival of European nation-states: “...[t]hey came to believe that annexation and expansion worked for the salvation of the Nation” (Arendt, 1979: 132). This is the reason behind the political emancipation of an, until then, apolitical bourgeoisie. Expansion did not happen just because of the surplus of capital, but also because of the surplus of people³ (Ribarević, 2015: 61).

Furthermore, the era of imperialism started with the coalition between the wealthy bourgeoisie and the mob. „These two superfluous forces, superfluous capital and superfluous working power, joined hands and left the country together” (Arendt, 1979: 150). The first years of the imperialist era were great for the mainland European states, but the consequences were soon to be revealed. Economic progress was slower, the ideology of racism was fully emancipated, and the imperialism diminished the power of the nation state and weakened the rule of the law⁴. In the end, the consequences outweighed the benefits.

Arendt's theory of imperialism is relevant to our article for two reasons. First, the political consequences for Africa and for Europe through and after

³ The logic of capitalism necessitates that economic progress results in more capital and more unemployed people. Hannah Arendt calls them the Mob (Ribarević, 2015: 61-62).

⁴ How exactly did imperialism ruin the nation state and the rule of law? Through the experiences of imperialism, the nation started to diminish in power because of the development of identities larger than the nation (pan-Slavic and pan-German movements). Furthermore, the rule of law was diminished because of the centralization of power in imperialised countries.

imperialism were costly: development of the racist doctrine, exploitation of the African people, political chaos in Africa that even nowadays is not concluded. As for Europe specifically, the development of the Pan-movements that disturbed the nation-state is also to be noted. World War One came soon after and the whole international politics experienced a massive turnaround. All in all, imperialism did not turn out to be the salvation for the nation-state, which it proclaimed it was. On the contrary, it proclaimed death to them. Second, we contend that the same pattern can be seen in China's politics today, and in this article, we will try to demonstrate that. In short, lack of domestic economic expansion means that the economic expansion, China's capital, must go elsewhere: to Africa and to Southeast Asia. As further arguments will show, China does not only use foreign direct investment, but also sends its workers abroad as a part of its strategy of expansion. It seems that history is repeating itself, as in today's China there is a coalition between rich capitalists, workers, and the state. As Hannah Arendt would say: „The alliance between capital and mob is to be found at the genesis of every consistently imperialist policy” (Arendt, 1979: 155).

The Why, the What, and the How

Although there may be more than one way in which Arendt's theory can be utilized to interpret China's contemporary global agenda, this article focuses, specifically, on one: the analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative and the discourse around it. As China's most ambitious and expansive venture up to date, we believe BRI is an imperialist project *par excellence*. In other words, it epitomizes what would in Arendt's view be an endeavour of expansion of the nation state. These claims will be examined and further explained in the paragraphs and sections that follow, but before that, the following needs to be stated. Although there may be dozens of big economic projects that China is working on at any moment, there is only one that is big and comprehensive enough to be seriously considered – and that, we think, is the Belt and Road Initiative. By focusing on this one project, and by also setting aside China's increasingly important role in global and regional partnerships and trade agreements⁵, this article may still be too short to effectively show the validity of the thesis presented. As such, it should be treated more as a provocative argument rather than a conclusive analysis. With that preamble being presented, let us now examine what BRI actually is.

⁵ For instance, China's role and power in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), as well as a possibility of China joining the new Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership or CPTPP (thediplomat.com, 2020).

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure development strategy which includes 1/3 of world trade and GDP and over 60% of the world's population (worldbank.org, 2018). Other than that, BRI is a project that aims at improving regional co-operation through better connectivity among countries lying on the ancient Silk Road and beyond. It includes the Silk Road Economic Belt for the land part and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road for the naval part. Initially, it involved 64 economies, but its scope has since broadened to *over 100* in some form (OECD, 2018: 9). With the sheer scope and time span of BRI (the project has a target completion date of 2049), it does not come as a surprise that it represents a central project of the general secretary of the Communist Party of China and President Xi Jinping's foreign policy, and that it was incorporated into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2017 (TheEconomist.com, 2020). Although a referenced OECD's report gives a much more comprehensive look at the pure economics of the BRI, for the purposes of our argument, describing BRI economics at length is unnecessary⁶. What *is* necessary, and this is where we agree with OECD's report, is "to give weight to how the authorities there state and characterise its objectives, as would be the case for policy statements for any country. Countries may or may not carry out and/or achieve all of their goals but, as a first step, it is important to document the stated aims and not to second-guess what these might be" (OECD, 2018: 3-4). As it is probably clear by now, we do not agree with the part of the sentence that says there should not be a second-guessing of China's motives. Yes, a purely economic report such as that of OECD's may not find it useful to second-guess the authorities' statements, but for this article, second-guessing and discourse analysis are central methodological approaches.

Having said that, we believe the immensity of BRI has implications which may not be obvious to everyone. The way in which they might become more obvious is to look at the discourse which China's officials and China's own people use to describe this initiative. It is hard to think of a person more suited to explain what BRI is than Xi Jinping himself, who said that "China will actively promote international co-operation through the Belt and Road Initiative", and that it hopes "to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity", thereby building "a new platform for international co-operation to create new drivers of shared development" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 61). On the "China's-own-people" side of the discourse analysis, a suitable subject for analysis is Alexious Lee⁷ who, along with Francis Cheung, in *One Belt, One Road: A Brilliant Plan* analysed and shortly summarized what BRI essentially is:

⁶ If the reader wants to know more about it, he/she is instructed to read the OECD's report.

⁷ "Alexious Lee is CLSA's head of China industrial research and covers the automobile, capital goods, infrastructure, and transport sectors. His team has also been covering China's Belt and Road initiative since its inception" (Clsa.com, 2021).

“Now faced with *a slowing economy at home*, China’s leadership is looking for *new channels to sustain its appetite for growth* at a time when developing neighbours are experiencing rapidly rising demand” (Clsa.com, 2021: 1).

The following sentence similarly states that:

“the project aims to *redirect the country’s domestic overcapacity* and capital for regional infrastructure development to improve trade and relations with ASEAN, Central Asian and European countries” (Clsa.com, 2021: 1).

Although these were only snippets of Lee’s analysis and Xi Jinping’s speech, their discourse is revealing. In particular, Lee’s words perfectly support our argument of China’s not-so-hidden imperialist tendencies. More importantly, they are in alignment with Arendt’s thesis that imperialism starts when the limits of the domestic economy are reached. Finally, both Lee’s analysis, and especially Xi Jinping’s speech, mention benefits that all the countries and regions involved in the project can get. Yes, that might be true, but does anyone really believe that China’s motives for the BRI are altruistic? If the reader is still unconvinced, this doubt about the real interests of China will be stressed once more and further examined in the fourth section. But, before that, let us now examine some of the domestic aspects of BRI for China.

Domestic Aspects of BRI

In this part we are going to analyse what BRI means for China’s domestic economy and how it can be seen as an example of consensus between the Chinese communist party, Chinese bourgeoisie and the Chinese mob (the Chinese immigrant workers in the BRI countries).

The first thing that can be noticed is that China’s idea of economic development is very specifically defined. For China, economic development, seen as the material improvement of people’s lives, is the first priority (Junchi, 2017: 166). China’s priority, therefore, is not an accumulation of capital, finding new technology or increasing the overall wealth. Rather, its main goal is to improve people’s lives and to reduce the gap between the poor and the rich. With that kind of mentality, the possibility of consensus amongst the people is high. The Belt and Road Initiative is not only an idea supported by the Chinese government, but also an idea which unites the Chinese people and the government. Therefore, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative presupposes a

nationalistic sentiment and the Chinese government's large role in the process (Junchi, 2017: 161). With that being said, why is BRI especially important for the domestic economy?

China is not considered a poor state anymore like it was in the 20th century. It is now the second largest economy in the world and cheap labour is not an immanent problem anymore: „A domestic problem for Beijing is that China is becoming increasingly expensive. This is especially true for Chinese labour costs, where minimum wage levels continue to grow“ (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020: 1). Therefore, China cannot be, and does not wish to be, an industrial economy of cheap labour; and this is where BRI comes to play. The idea of BRI is to empower the middle class, thereby stimulating domestic consumption and transforming the domestic economy: „Domestic stabilization is indeed the final goal of the Belt and Road Initiative, as propounded by most of the Chinese elites. The biggest challenge China faces is indeed the structural reform of its economic model from investment and export, to domestic consumption“ (Junchi, 2017: 161). The next question, then, is: why is it so important to stabilize the domestic economy?

With the transformation of the domestic economy and its workforce, China still needs cheap labour to maintain its competitiveness in global export markets and the labour pool is coming from BRI itself (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). Devonshire-Ellis suggests that with China's rising minimum wage level, the gap between BRI nations⁸ and China will start to widen over the next five years, providing China with a huge, available, additional, yet lower cost, offshore workforce that can be put to work in Chinese-owned industrial parks around the world, by Chinese-state-owned enterprises and their various overseas joint venture partners (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). Here is where Arendt's theory comes to play. Just as the European nations had transformed their domestic economies by searching for the alternative cheap labour abroad, the same pattern that Hannah Arendt described is now becoming a Chinese reality. Therefore, BRI is not backed by the domestic economy – it is the tool to reform the domestic economy and empower the middle class (Junchi, 2017: 161). It is not surprising, then, that this transformation of the domestic economy is backed by the Chinese bourgeoisie, workers, and the Chinese communist party.

Related to the previous point, Branko Milanović asks the following questions: if capitalists manage to attain economic and political power, what will be the consequences of that and who will stop them in this process? (Milanović, 2018). In other words, will they not use this power to transform China into representative democracy? His article paints a picture

⁸ Those that are part of China's plans with BRI.

of the bourgeoisie that is in conflict with the Chinese communist party, but the reality is different. Although there is no document on how many rich people are in the China's communist party, there is an information that the richest 209 parliament delegates are each worth more than 2 billion yuan or 300 million dollars⁹ (www.cnbc.com, 2017). With so many rich people in China's parliament, CCP gives them an opportunity to influence the direction of policy by submitting proposals for legislation or lobbying government officials, with one of these proposals being the BRI itself. The bourgeoisie had a say for the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Chinese workers had a positive work experience as being part of the project, especially in African region. On that matter, Howard French, in his book *China's Second Continent*, says that Chinese people had positive experiences in Africa and that they spread the word back to China. Often, after some time abroad, they begin to tell their friends and relatives using words like "a place of such great opportunity" (weaicolumbia.com, 2014).

As we have hopefully shown, the Belt and Road Initiative has a positive impact on the domestic economy and increases Chinese emigration, which is another form of expansion. In the words of Hannah Arendt, we can say that BRI represents a national coalition between the mob, bourgeoisie and the CCP – and the primary goal of this coalition seems to be economic and political expansion. Other than that, although BRI is a global project, it also has a huge impact on regional relations. „Another huge factor prompting a new wave of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia is the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Along with this flow of lucrative Chinese foreign direct investment into developing billion-dollar infrastructure projects in Brunei, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia – just to name a few – comes the movement of state employees, workers, entrepreneurs and their family members to these countries" (theaseanpost.com, 2018: 1). With that being said, the next part will seek to provide more information on the regional and global impact of BRI.

From Regional Primacy to Global Dominance

We will now turn our attention to the regional and global perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative. Here we try to answer the following questions. First, what is the potential impact of BRI on China's Hard Power, Soft Power, and Smart Power, and which of these powers would best describe China's approach to BRI, both regionally and globally? Second, and connected to the first, how does China's approach to BRI connect to Arendt's theory of imperialism? In the attempt to answer these questions,

⁹ Their combined wealth is equivalent to the annual GDPs of Belgium and Sweden, using World Bank figures on GDP for those countries (Cnbc.com, 2017).

it will hopefully become clear how China intends to use BRI to strengthen its long-term geopolitical and economic position via all the three mentioned concepts of power. Furthermore, our intention is to show how China's BRI can be viewed as a prime example of Arendt's understanding of imperialism. That understanding, once again, states that "expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism" (Arendt, 1979: 125).

From the hard power perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative can enhance China's position in two ways: it can strengthen the value of China's national currency Renminbi, thereby strengthening its economic power; and it can strengthen China's military power (Beeson, 2018: 7). Of the two, we focus on the economic and developmental aspect, which we see as closely connected to some soft power strategies. Specifically, regarding Renminbi's growing position in the global financial system, Sarah Chan emphasizes the following: "First, it is expected that RMB settlement and investment will continue to increase in tandem with the expansion in China's trade and investment in the Belt and Road region in the next few years (...) Second, BRI will help address Asia's infrastructure deficit and lift economic and social development in the region" (Chan, 2017: 68). Chan does mention here potential obstacles for Renminbi's internationalization, such as its dependence on progress in financial reforms and capital account liberalization, but she also, in our view, shows how China intends to use BRI for financial, and thereby economic, expansion. The reason for this conclusion is simple: one of the surest ways for a country to strengthen its economic position is to increase the value and usage of its official currency in the global economy. Perhaps frighteningly, in this respect, Benjamin Cohen says that "for many (...) it is the yuan, not Europe's joint money, that is the real currency of tomorrow – the challenger that will finally topple the dollar from its place at the top of the Currency Pyramid. Where once euro enthusiasts seemed to be everywhere, today we have innumerable yuan enthusiasts. Internationalization, it is said, is the RMB's manifest destiny, an unstoppable by-product of China's remarkable economic success" (Cohen, 2015: 214–236).

In another view on BRI, Mark Beeson stresses the importance of economic (and regional) development in the global balance of power, and states that "if the BRI becomes a reality, it will quite literally cement China's place at the centre of a regional network of production processes that will inevitably enhance China's overall economic and geopolitical importance. At the very least, China's ascent is forcing a reassessment about the nature of power and influence in the contemporary international system" (Beeson, 2018: 1). Chan further confirms this view by exemplifying various types of arrangements and agreements between China and its Asian neighbours, and concludes that "linkages between China and ASEAN are

already flourishing on multiple fronts via trade, investment, and tourism. The BRI is expected to alter the regional economic landscape by further enhancing development and connectivity in the future” (Chan, 2017: 69). Also, Beeson later emphasizes that the BRI “has immense symbolic and practical importance. If it succeeds (...) it will not only restore China’s diplomatic fortunes, but will also reinforce its geoeconomic influence for the foreseeable future. Barring a not impossible economic or political upheaval in China itself, the BRI may be the most tangible manifestation yet of China’s seemingly unstoppable rise to regional primacy” (Beeson, 2018: 13). Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, Tom Miller states the following:

“President Xi’s mission is to return China to what he regards as its natural, rightful, and historical position as the greatest power in Asia. That does not mean that China has to replace the US as the world’s only superpower, but it does mean that Asia has to predominate in its own backyard (...) the goal of China’s economic diplomacy is to create a modern tribute system, with all roads literally leading to Beijing” (Miller, 2017: 18).

With all of that in mind, it seems that China’s approach to BRI could best be described as a form of smart power: a perfect combination of hard and soft powers, which employs various strategies of economic and military strengthening (at different points along the “One Belt”), as well as various strategies of investments in alliances, partnerships, institutions, and regional relations. Obviously, not everything China plans with BRI is negative for the countries and partners included. They will certainly get some benefits, and these benefits might even improve their overall economic positions. That said, it would be a serious understatement to say that a country as big and powerful as China is mostly a benevolent benefactor without hidden interests. Therefore, all these authors confirm what is, in our view, a seemingly simple China’s plan: regional strengthening and positioning, followed by global expansion.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to show how China’s biggest economic project can be seen through the lens of Hannah Arendt’s understanding of imperialism. By focusing on some crucial aspects of Arendt’s theory and by comparing them with some important facets of the Belt and Road Initiative, such as its economic significance and domestic discourses that surround it, we have hopefully shown that BRI can indeed be seen as an imperialist economic project. To conclude our thesis, once more we are going to connect our argument of China’s modern imperialism back to Arendt’s view of

imperialism and its sources. In order to do that, we are going to use the following quote from *The Communist Manifesto* as a provocative interpretative tool:

“The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which [bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image” (Marx, 1996: 16).

Yes, the quote shows how Arendt’s theory of imperialism was, at least in part, influenced by Karl Marx. More importantly, it paints a picture of what we see as China’s imperialist tendencies and imperatives. Only in this case, and somewhat paradoxically, the walls that are being battered down are not that of China but that of its neighbouring nations. And, the so-called “heavy artillery” might not necessarily be cheap prices of commodities (or at least no longer), but the Belt and Road Initiative – as its most ambitious project – through which China intends to conquer the world.

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