

Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Hong Yu. Springer 2024

By Scatt CARSON [†]

Abstract. This book offers a comprehensive, decade-long analysis of the origins, evolution, and geopolitical consequences of China's signature foreign policy initiative: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As the center of China's aspiration to become a global power, the BRI is analyzed as both a strategic platform for driving global economic growth through massive infrastructure connectivity and an assertive instrument of Beijing's proactive diplomacy under President Xi Jinping. The study unpacks the core motivations, including managing domestic overcapacity, securing global market access for Chinese firms, and transforming economic might into geostrategic leverage. The book's analytical depth is provided through rigorous case studies across key priority regions, including Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iran). Crucially, it assesses China's pragmatic response to international criticism, detailing the development of "BRI 2.0," which emphasizes higher standards, financial sustainability, and an expansion into digital and health sectors. Furthermore, the analysis contextualizes the BRI within the broader landscape of Sino-US strategic competition, evaluating competing initiatives like the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). This volume is an essential reference for understanding the BRI's multifaceted role in reshaping the 21st-century world order.

Keywords. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Geopolitics and Geoeconomics; Infrastructure Connectivity; China-ASEAN Relations; Global Governance.

JEL. F50; O19; R40; F15; P48.

Book Review

Hong Yu's *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* is a timely and rigorously researched volume that offers one of the most comprehensive academic examinations of the BRI since its inception in 2013. Published at the initiative's ten-year anniversary mark, the book moves beyond descriptive accounts to provide an in-depth analysis of the Initiative's underpinnings, strategic goals, on-the-ground implementation, and global-level contestation.

The central thesis of Yu's work is that the BRI is the definitive centerpiece of China's new, proactive foreign policy, intended to not merely participate in, but to actively reshape, the existing global economic and political order. The author convincingly frames the BRI as a calculated strategy rooted in China's domestic economic imperatives—such as managing industrial overcapacity—while simultaneously pursuing grand geostrategic ambitions to achieve a position of pre-eminence on the world stage. The book's core contribution lies in its multi-layered approach, systematically detailing the interplay of domestic politics, regional dynamics, and global competition that defines the BRI's past, present, and future.

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II. Summary of Content and Structure

The book is structured into eleven chapters, logically progressing from the domestic origins and philosophical drivers of the BRI to its complex geopolitical implications and subsequent pragmatic adjustments. The structure is testament to the author's holistic view of the initiative, ensuring no critical dimension is overlooked.

A. Foundations: Origins, Motivations, and Globalisation (Chapters 1 & 2)

Chapter 1 meticulously assesses the driving forces and rationale behind the BRI. Yu highlights the significance of the BRI as a paradigm shift in Chinese foreign policy, moving away from Deng Xiaoping's low-profile approach to Xi Jinping's assertive diplomacy. The motivations are presented as a blend of economic necessity (absorbing overcapacity, securing market access, and industrial upgrading) and political ambition (boosting the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy and putting China at the centre of global geoeconomics).

Chapter 2 contextualizes the BRI within the debate on economic globalisation. Yu argues that while the West exhibits growing resentment toward free trade, China is leveraging the BRI to champion its own vision of interconnected, infrastructure-driven globalisation. This chapter establishes the critical link between infrastructure development and connectivity as the central pillar of the BRI, which China believes is key to dominating the world in the 21st century.

B. Regional Focus: Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Chapters 3–7)

The middle section of the book is dedicated to specific regional and country case studies, which provide rich empirical depth to the broader arguments.

Chapter 3 focuses on the crucial China-ASEAN relationship, detailing the evolution from the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area to cooperation under the BRI framework. It explores how Southeast Asia, a priority region, navigates the dual pressures of Chinese investment and the deepening strategic rivalry between the US and China.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide in-depth country studies, each illustrating a different facet of BRI engagement:

- Vietnam (Chapter 4): Examines the country's mixed reactions, balancing close economic ties with China against geopolitical suspicions, particularly in the context of the US-China trade war.
- Singapore (Chapter 5): Details the China-Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Project, showcasing Singapore's role as a financial and logistical hub for China's western corridor—a model for third-party market cooperation.
- Cambodia (Chapter 6): Highlights the dynamics of strengthening ties with a key partner, focusing on the positive effects of Chinese investment alongside the persistent issues and challenges, such as the risk of debt and lack of transparency.

Chapter 7 broadens the scope to the Middle East, specifically analyzing China's deepening ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran. The chapter emphasizes the role of energy and the geostrategic significance of China's mediation in the Saudi Arabia-Iran deal, positing it as a major geopolitical shift. It also explores China's ambition for RMB settlements in energy trading, linking the BRI to China's broader RMB internationalization strategy.

C. Contestation, Financing, and Evolution (Chapters 8–11)

The final chapters address the global context and future trajectory of the BRI.

Chapter 8, a crucial analysis of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, evaluates the G7's counter-initiative, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). Yu frames the PGII as part of the Sino-US strategic competition, analyzing the emerging environment of competing regional and global connectivity initiatives.

Chapter 9 focuses on the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), analyzing its role in regional infrastructure financing, which complements and supports the broader BRI ecosystem.

Chapter 10 provides the essential analysis of the BRI's adaptation, coining the term "BRI 2.0". In response to international criticism regarding debt traps and environmental standards, China has implemented readjustment measures. The modified BRI 2.0 focuses on financially and environmentally sustainable projects and an expansion into new areas such as the digital and health fronts (Digital Silk Road, Health Silk Road). The case study of Central Asian countries effectively demonstrates these shifts in practice, while also acknowledging that the BRI remains largely a China-centric bilateral initiative despite claims of multilateralism.

Finally, Chapter 11 offers concluding reflections on the BRI's first decade, evaluating its profound implications for China, the region, and the world.

III. Analytical Review: Strengths and Contributions

Yu's book stands out for its numerous analytical strengths, making it a pivotal work for scholars, students, and policymakers.

A. Comprehensive and Interdisciplinary Scope

The book's primary strength is its genuinely interdisciplinary approach. It synthesizes insights from economics (trade, investment, and industrial policy), political science (foreign policy shift, global governance reform, and strategic competition), and economic geography (infrastructure connectivity and regional development). This breadth is necessary for understanding an initiative as vast and complex as the BRI, which touches upon political, infrastructure, economic, social, and security dimensions.

B. Empirical Depth through Strategic Case Studies

The author masterfully utilizes regional and country-specific case studies to prevent the analysis from becoming purely theoretical or overly abstract. By contrasting the models of engagement in Southeast Asia (e.g., Vietnam's caution, Singapore's institutional partnership, Cambodia's strong alignment) and the Middle East's energy-centric ties, Yu demonstrates the adaptability and flexibility of BRI implementation in practice, what the author refers to as China's search for "third-party market cooperation". The deep dives serve to illustrate the local interests and external challenges that shape Beijing's policy execution.

C. Timeliness and the BRI 2.0 Concept

The book is remarkably current, particularly for its coverage of the BRI's evolution into the "BRI 2.0" phase. This conceptual framing captures the post-2019 shifts—driven by international pressure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for higher-quality, sustainable outcomes—a crucial development often missed in early BRI scholarship. The shift towards "small but beautiful" projects, digital cooperation, and greater financial sustainability, as detailed in

S. Carson, JEL, 12(1), 2025. pp.58-62

Chapter 10, is a critical insight for understanding the future trajectory of the initiative.

D. Balanced and Critical Assessment

While recognizing the economic potential for developing countries in addressing their chronic infrastructure shortage, Yu maintains a critical and balanced perspective. The analysis does not shy away from the significant criticisms, including the risk of debt distress, the lack of transparency, and the deeply ingrained China-centric approach that hinders the BRI from being perceived as a truly multilateral endeavor. The acknowledgement of anti-China protests in Central Asia demonstrates the author's commitment to presenting the initiative's internal and external challenges candidly.

E. Authoritative Methodology

The author's ten-year research journey on the topic, complemented by extensive fieldwork, interviews with Chinese central and local government officials, policy analysts, and scholars across regions, lends significant authority to the findings. The reliance on primary Chinese government plans, policy initiatives, and statistical data from China and multilateral institutions ensures the analysis is grounded in empirical evidence.

IV. Critical Assessment: Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its immense strengths, any analysis of an evolving, grand strategy like the BRI will inherently face limitations, offering avenues for future research.

A. The Challenge of "China-Centricity"

While the author addresses the criticism that the BRI is a China-centric initiative, the book's analytical lens remains primarily focused on China's motivations, China's foreign policy, and China's readjustments. Although necessary for understanding the architect, a true assessment of multilateralism would benefit from deeper, comparative analysis from the perspective of recipient nations' domestic politics and policy debates, especially beyond the main case studies. The book sets the stage for such work by highlighting the "mixed reactions" and local resentment encountered.

B. The Evolving Landscape of BRI 2.0

The concept of BRI 2.0 is the key to the future, yet, as an ongoing strategic shift, its long-term success is still unfolding. While the book assesses the initial progress and intentions—particularly the move towards digital and health cooperation—the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of these "small but beautiful" projects are yet to materialize fully. Future academic work, building on Yu's analysis, will need to rigorously assess the actual impact of BRI 2.0's commitment to higher standards and sustainability on the ground in a broader range of countries.

C. Deepening the Nexus with Global Financial Architecture

The book touches upon the AIIB and the RMB internationalization strategy. However, the nexus between BRI financing and the restructuring of the global debt architecture—especially post-pandemic—warrants even deeper focus. The impact of China's role as a major creditor in debt restructuring negotiations is a complex and evolving issue with profound global governance implications that will define the BRI's reputation for the next decade.

V. Conclusion

Hong Yu's *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* is an indispensable and landmark academic work. It provides a foundational understanding of the BRI's origins and its bold role as a catalyst for a new global order, while simultaneously offering a mature, decade-long perspective that incorporates the necessary evolution into "BRI 2.0." By meticulously detailing the strategic, economic, and regional dimensions, and contextualizing the Initiative against the backdrop of Sino-US rivalry, Yu delivers an essential, authoritative reference. This book is required reading for any serious student, scholar, or policymaker seeking to navigate the complexities of China's global rise and the enduring consequences of the world's most ambitious infrastructure and connectivity project.



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