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**BELT & ROAD IN
GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

CONCEPTUALIZING THE ‘BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE’ AND ITS EFFECTS

WORKSHOP REPORT
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Introducing BRGP

The Belt & Road in Global Perspective (BRGP) is a research partnership among the University of Toronto, Nazarbaev University, and National University Singapore. The project is based out of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy and is supported by a \$300,000 grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The Principle Investigators of our project are Professor Edward Schatz (Associate Professor of Political Science and Acting Director of the Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies) and Professor Rachel Silvey (Professor in the Department of Geography and Richard Charles Lee Director of the Asian Institute). Our partnership aims to take stock of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trillion-dollar infrastructure and development program originally unveiled by President Xi Jinping in 2013 as 'One Belt, One Road'. The BRI is a truly massive undertaking spanning more than a hundred countries, though precise measures of the project's scope can be difficult to ascertain, for reasons discussed in this report.

In contrast to analyses of the BRI that understand it primarily as a massive exercise in soft power by Beijing or as a geopolitical challenge to the liberal rules-based international order, our project interrogates the initiative's transformative 'downstream' effects on the local contexts in which it operates. Our blog, *Transformations: Downstream Effects of the BRI*, solicits contributions by researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds and regional specializations. Launched in January 2021, our blog has published articles on a range of topics including Chinese migration, hydropower in Southeast Asia, and corruption in Central Asia. We have also hosted three well-attended virtual events featuring leading experts on the BRI from the US, Uzbekistan, and the UK. In the 2021-2022 academic year, we will welcome a new Postdoctoral Fellow to our team, as well as inaugurating the first iteration of our tri-university undergraduate course on the Belt and Road Initiative, taught out of Toronto but open to students from all three participating universities.

By establishing partnerships across three major universities and cultivating relationships with academics, researchers, and policy experts from around the world, we hope to develop a network that is well-positioned to track, analyse, and understand the BRI as its effects continue to make themselves apparent over the years to come. As such, our June workshop, *Conceptualizing the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and its Effects*, was the first of many conversations that our project aims to facilitate. We hope to continue growing our network, both inside and outside of the academy, between and across disciplinary, methodological, and national perspectives.

Structure and Goals

Our workshop took place over three days via Zoom video link. The closed event included thirty participants from twenty different universities scattered across North America, Europe, and Asia. Presenters circulated papers in advance to facilitate deeper engagement with each other's work. The first two days each featured two panels with three or four papers per panel, with the conversation directed by a chair and discussant. The workshop concluded on the third day with a roundtable conversation among the four project leaders summarizing key themes from the workshop. Consistent with the focus of our larger project on 'downstream' effects of the BRI, we invited participants to consider what historical antecedents, conceptual frameworks, and comparative points of reference should inform our attempts to 'think into' the BRI and its global impact. Although papers covered a range of salient issues, discussed further in the following section, we provided three key themes to structure the discussions, these being the BRI's effects on migration, labour relations, and social mobilization.

Summary of Key Themes

This section lays out some of the key themes and discussions to emerge from our workshop. In the interests of protecting the identities of our participants, as well as the confidentiality of their work in progress, details of specific papers and presenters are not provided. Instead, we have outlined some of the broader overarching priorities, concerns, and ideas that seemed especially pertinent.

A central problem that repeatedly resurfaced in the workshop was one of definition. Because of the opaque ways in which the BRI is often defined, it can be difficult to determine when a project should formally be understood as belonging to this larger initiative and when it should instead be viewed in more general terms as part of China's broader development and financing objectives. The more we try to hone in on what exactly the BRI is, as opposed to what it purports to be, the blurrier our understanding can become. As one presenter pointed out, the breathless hype surrounding the unprecedented scope of the BRI can obscure the more banal, on-the-ground realities and relationships of which the BRI is comprised. Given that Chinese loans, investments, and construction projects across Eurasia and Africa predate the announcement of the original 'One Belt, One Road' project in 2013, we are also left with the question of whether all such projects should now be understood in relation to the BRI, or whether the BRI represents something novel and unique. On a related note, there was discussion during one panel about how the expansion of Chinese surveillance cameras, communications infrastructure, and facial recognition software is presented as part of the 'Digital Silk Road' (DSR). This invites a similar set of questions regarding whether we should regard the DSR as part of the BRI or a distinct category of analysis.

Alongside the question of how to demarcate the boundaries of what the BRI is and is not, presenters also discussed competing perspectives on how the BRI functions. The BRI is, after all, a massive transnational cluster of projects that do not follow the kinds of multilateral frameworks or precedents laid out by the UN, ASEAN, or NATO. As such, presenters discussed whether the BRI should be understood in terms of unequal power relations and hegemony, bilateralism, or a new

framework altogether. The disproportionate size and strength of China compared to many BRI host countries certainly cannot be ignored, but presenters also pointed out that we should not assume as a rule that China does not need its partners as much as they need China. Ground-level studies of local political mobilizations for and against the construction of BRI projects show varying levels of acquiescence, resistance, and negotiation. Although Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is regularly cited as evidence of China's nefarious use of the BRI as a tool of 'debt-trap' diplomacy, the bigger picture in countries across Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Africa, is much more complicated. Researching local concerns, desires, and contexts in a case-by-case basis is a more effective way of understanding what the BRI looks like on the ground, rather than relying on generalizations about Chinese hegemony, soft power, or 'debt-traps'. Cross-cutting research incorporating this range of local perspectives is a key goal of our project going forward.

Presenters did not limit the conversation to 'hard' infrastructures of roads, ports, railways, and fibre-optic cables, but also devoted considerable discussion to the 'soft' infrastructures of human mobility that knit together the various strands of the BRI. Many BRI projects have tapped into long-term routes of migrant labour that date back decades or even centuries. But, as our presenters noted, these labour flows are extremely heterogeneous and cannot simply be understood through the binary of 'Chinese' versus 'local' workers. Class, race, and gender all play profound roles in shaping the dynamics among the labour forces of various projects, further complicating simplistic narratives of the BRI that assume a clear division defined by Chinese imperialism and geopolitical priorities. In places like Kazakhstan and Ethiopia, some take a positive view towards Chinese culture, embracing the study of Mandarin in much the same way that English was the lingua franca of the business world of the 1990s. In other cases, the new jobs generated by BRI projects have created opportunities for greater female participation in the workforce, which in turn leads to a host of consequences on gender relations and family structures. At the same time, it is certainly true that preferential treatment for Chinese workers, internal company hierarchies, and displacements of local rural populations all contribute to resentment and ambivalence towards the development promises made by Beijing in many BRI locations. In short, the nature and consequences of labour migration in relation to BRI projects are highly variegated and, much like the BRI itself, do not lend themselves well to simple, monolithic explanations or analyses.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this section, we present four key themes from the workshop's concluding roundtable discussion. We also briefly discuss the project's next steps and contact information for those wishing to learn more about BRGP.

- 1) *Scale*: To understand the current and future effects of the BRI, it is necessary to pay close attention to the multiple scales at which this initiative operates. A central tenet of the BRGP is that a macro-scale research approach to the BRI inevitably fails to grasp the complexities of the local and highly heterogeneous sites in which BRI projects unfold. At the same time, our project aims to provide space for overcoming the blindspots that can result from hyperlocalized studies that do not situate processes 'on the ground' alongside larger, global processes of capital accumulation, infrastructure development, labour migration, and digital surveillance.
- 2) *Historical antecedents*: The relevance of various historical antecedents and analogies was a significant topic of debate during the workshop. Participants held divergent opinions on whether the Marshall Plan, the ancient Silk Road, or the infrastructural development of European colonialism provided a more compelling source of comparison with the BRI. Another question discussed in the final panel was what makes the BRI distinctively Chinese, as opposed to being situated within a larger global story of capitalism, technology, infrastructure, and transnational labour flows in the 21st century world economy. In other words, if we move beyond larger geopolitical narratives about the rise of China, what makes the BRI unique or novel?
- 3) *Visibility and invisibility*: The lack of an official cartographical representation of the BRI produced by Beijing seems like a deliberate strategy to maintain a useful ambiguity about its scope, as Galen Murton (James Madison University) argued in our *Transformations* blog. It is a mistake to think about the BRI as a single plan or coherent policy – instead we must account for the 'entanglements of power relations and subjectivities', including various gaps, ambiguities, and sites of contestation, to understand where the BRI announces itself and where it remains (perhaps deliberately) obscured. This in turn demands that we consider the relationship between the BRI and broader economic processes that render invisible the labour, infrastructure, and ecological effects of global supply chains. For more on this, see our recent interview with Laleh Khalili (University College London), a recording of which is available on the BRGP website.
- 4) *Research ethics*: Research on the BRI encompasses a vast range of field sites in more than a hundred countries. Researchers must be attentive to the variety of factors that could make participation in their projects risky for local participants. New surveillance technologies, facial recognition software, and increasingly tight control over electronic communications in many authoritarian countries pose additional dangers. Deeply-grounded knowledge in local contexts is important for researchers seeking to conduct comparative research across a variety of sites. Asking participants questions about privacy and informed consent, for example, presupposes a mutually intelligible understanding of these terms. Working with local partners and adapting our ethics protocols in a way that is sensitive to the cultural and linguistic particularities of our research sites are two important steps in beginning this reflexive process.

The next steps for this project will include publication of selected papers in an edited volume published by a leading academic press. Our next major conference will take place in 2022 at one of our two partner institutions, likely National University Singapore. In the meantime, we will continue to publish regularly in our *Transformations* blog to grow our network of academic contributors around the world, especially in regions directly impacted by BRI projects. We also hope to begin reaching outside of academia to forge connections with government departments like Global Affairs Canada, as well as NGOs and think tanks.

To learn more about our project, please visit our website (munkschool.utoronto.ca/beltandroad/) or send any inquiries to beltandroad.munkschool@utoronto.ca. We regularly share updates, new articles, and BRI-related news on our Twitter account, [@BeltandroadMunk](https://twitter.com/BeltandroadMunk).