

CONCEPTUALISING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) AND ITS EFFECTS

Workshop Report

May 18-19, 2023

Astana, Kazakhstan

Neekoo Collett

Digital Outreach Manager

Belt & Road in Global Perspective

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Belt & Road in Global Perspective (BRGP) is a collaborative research initiative involving the University of Toronto, Nazarbayev University, and the National University of Singapore. The project, based at Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, is supported by a \$300,000 grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Professors Edward Schatz (Associate Professor of Political Science and Acting Director of the Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies) and Rachel Silvey (Professor in the Department of Geography and Richard Charles Lee Director of the Asian Institute) lead the project.

The BRGP aims to conceptualize and assess China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trillion-dollar infrastructure and development program introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 as 'One Belt, One Road'. While the BRI is a massive undertaking with far-reaching implications, our project seeks to understand the BRI in its local, "downstream" contexts.

To this end, the project has undertaken a variety of activities, including:

- Publishing 20+ blog entries on our blog, *Transformations: Downstream Effects of the BRI*, on diverse topics related to the BRI
- Hosting two workshops on *Conceptualizing the Belt and Road Initiative*, virtually from the University of Toronto in 2021 and at Nazarbayev University (Astana, Kazakhstan) in 2023
- Hosting 7+ speaker events—online and in person— by scholars from countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland
- Offering an undergraduate course on the Belt and Road Initiative taught out of the University of Toronto and open to students from all three participating universities

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



Professor Edward Schatz delivering an address at the workshop

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

The workshop, titled "Conceptualising the belt and road initiative (BRI) and its effects", was held at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan from May 18-19, 2023. The workshop was organized by Professor Neil Collins and Dana Kassymbayeva of Nazarbayev University.

The event included seventeen presenters from fifteen different universities—four in Kazakhstan, six in Europe, three in Asia, and two in North America. This geographic diversity of participants reflects the project's aim of fostering a network of researchers working on BRI-related topics that includes diverse perspectives from scholars.

The workshop took place over two days, with three sessions each day. In each session, two or three participants presented their work on a common

theme and answered questions from the audience.

The workshop was open to the public and was advertised widely within academic and policy spaces in Astana, as well as on Twitter and the project's website. The workshop had sixty-six registrants from a wide range of universities, departments, organizations, and government ministries. Through these interactions between presenters and audience members, workshop attendees were able to collaborate, exchange insights, and integrate their expertise in comprehending the multifaceted aspects of the BRI.

The key themes explored by the workshop's discussion are summarized briefly in the next section, with brief summaries of the presentations.

KEY THEMES

The "human dimension" of the BRI

Presenters investigated the BRI's effects on people-to-people ties, highlighting the importance of public diplomacy, bilateral labor agreements, and Corporate Social Responsibility policies in shaping the effects and perceptions of the BRI in host countries.

Yize Huang (Nazarbayev University) argued that visa facilitation for Chinese citizens serves as leverage for Belarus, Armenia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to practice multilateralism and mitigate geopolitical crises, despite also raising concerns about immigration influx and Sinophobic sentiment. Questions of Sinophobia and Sinophilia were also raised by **Jessica E. Neafie** (Nazarbayev University), who coded over 10,000 tweets from the Kazakh Twitter space in order to trace how Kazakhstani online sentiments towards China have changed over time. **Marika Miner** (University of California, Davis) investigated the diverse effects of BRI exposure on identity salience, social attitudes, and civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan. **Yelena Sadovskaya** (Al-Farabi Kazakh State University) considered the "human dimension" of the BRI with respect to Chinese companies' Corporate Social Responsibility policies in Kazakhstan, focusing on effects related to training, career development, and access to higher education for young personnel.

Shared heritage & the Silk Road

Presenters questioned how the historical concept of the Silk Road is reinterpreted and used in the conceptualization of the BRI and its relationship to nation-building, foreign policy-making, and soft-power generation.

David O'Brien (Ruhr University) problematized conceptions of the Silk Road as a "shared heritage" and highlighted the necessity of adopting "parallax perspectives" in understanding the complexities of the Silk Road. **Berikbol Dukeyev** (Suleyman Demirel University) examined interpretations of the Silk Road and its conceptual continuity with the BRI in Kazakhstan's geography and history textbooks, illustrating competing discourses related to Kazakhstan's multiculturalism and historic connectivity with China. More broadly, **Giulia Sciorati** (University of Trento) investigated the role of culture in China's generation of soft power through an analysis of cooperative initiatives in the heritage sector. **Assel Bitabarova** (KAZGUU University) examined how China reworks the Silk Road narrative in order to depict Central Asia as a central place in its historical connections, and how Central Asian nations participate in reproducing the Silk Road discourse as active agents.

KEY THEMES, CONT.

Effects on the global supply chain

Presenters explored the financial mechanisms and funding sources behind the BRI, as well as the economic implications and challenges associated with the BRI's financing strategies.

Verena La Mela (University of Zurich) presented data from intensive fieldwork in Nurly, Kazakhstan and identified some of the translocal paradoxes and grievances related to large-scale infrastructures.

Shazia Ghani (Grenoble Centre of Economics Research) took stock of the major developments in financial integration related to the BRI, identifying China's relative inexperience and domestic debt, as well as capacity constraints and underdeveloped markets in BRI countries, as key challenges that will need to be overcome. **Ammar Malik** (The College of William & Mary) presented key findings from AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, including a turn towards semi-concessional and nonconcessional debt rather than aid, the increasing role of Chinese state-owned commercial banks, and the implications of collateralization and underreported debts in Low and Middle Income Countries.

Implementation and challenges

Presenters identified some of the major implementation challenges faced by BRI infrastructure projects and questioned the BRI's impact on host countries' public financial management, governance, and stability.

Pascal Abb (Peace Research Institute) examined the BRI's effects on political stability, political violence, and trust in government in conflict states, concluding that there is a need for both further conflict sensitivity and risk management, especially on the parts of Chinese companies, regulators, and funding agencies. **Beril Ocaklı** (Centre for East European and International Studies) presented case studies of the Rikoti Highway reconstruction in Georgia and the Zhanatas Wind Park in Kazakhstan, revealing the BRI as a relational, open-ended, and adaptive process with translocal paradoxes and grievances. **Yasar Sari** (Ibn Haldun University) explored the effects of the BRI on the development of Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's foreign policies. **Oyuna Baldakova** (King's College London) examined how the Digital Silk Road is being constructed and incorporated into bilateral relations and connected to national policy-making.

NEXT STEPS

Through its presentations and discussion, the workshop identified specific knowledge gaps and areas of contention in the existing literature on the BRI. In pinpointing these gaps, the workshop sets the stage for future research that can address these areas and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the initiative.

By bringing together scholars at various career stages and from different countries, the workshop facilitated networking and collaboration opportunities. We hope that this workshop can lead to joint projects, publications, and increased knowledge exchange in the future.

We will continue these important conversations on our blog, Transformations, where we will continue to publish articles related to the "downstream effects" of the BRI. Our next major conference will take place in early 2024 at the National University Singapore. The call for participation will be posted on [our website](#) and distributed in our newsletter, which you can [subscribe to here](#).



Workshop presenters participating in a post-conference cultural excursion