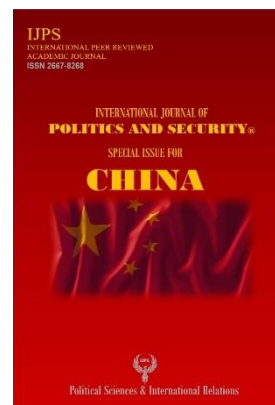


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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Regime Fragility: Explaining China's International Efforts at Solving Domestic Insecurity

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Regime Fragility: Explaining China's International Efforts at Solving Domestic Insecurity

Thomas AMEYAW-BROBBEY*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss China's sources of regime insecurity, its impact on world peace and conflict and how the regime addresses these challenges. How does China's regime insecurity affect international relations, peace and conflict and how is it responding to such challenge in order not to disturb international peace and cooperation? How do China's public reactions affect international relations, conflict, peace and cooperation?

It argues that China's regime insecurity caused by strong nationalist emotions and domestic discontent is a potential source of impediment on world peace than its external strength. By using foreign policy initiative and primary sources, the paper shows that, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one course of action the Chinese regime addresses its challenges. Specifically, China is strengthening regime security and external peace through foreign policy – providing for the international dimension of the domestic threat – by trying to decrease domestic discontent through securing international commercial activities with its BRI, to stem horizontal inequalities and regime insecurity.

I base the theoretical argument on the Diversionary Theory of War. The paper helps fill the gap in the discussion of China and international security which has been dominated by China's rise in power capabilities.

Keywords: *China, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regime Insecurity, Nationalism, Diversionary War theory.*

Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI) ve Rejimin Kırılganlığı: Çin'in İç Güvenlik Sorunlarını Çözmeye Yönelik Uluslararası Çabaları

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Çin'in rejim güvensizliğinin kaynaklarını ve bunların dünya barışına olan etkileri ile rejimin bu sorunu nasıl ele aldığını tartışmaktır. Bu kapsamda “Çin'in rejim güvenliği sorunu uluslararası ilişkilerini, barış ve çatışma parametrelerini nasıl etkiliyor ve Çin uluslararası alanda barış ve işbirliğini etkilemeyecek şekilde bu zorluklara nasıl mukabele ediyor? sorusu ile “Çin'de kamuoyunun tepkilerinin uluslararası ilişkilerine nasıl yansıyor?” soruları araştırmanın temel sorunsalını oluşturmaktadır.

Bu makalede Çin'in güçlü milliyetçi duygularının ve iç hoşnutsuzluğun neden olduğu rejim güvensizliğinin, dünya barışı ve Çin'in dış gücü için potansiyel bir engel olduğu savunulmaktadır. Bu kapsamda Çin'in dış politikadaki girişimleri ile birincil kaynaklardan elde edilen veriler, Çin'in Kuşak Yol Girişimini (BRI) bu zorluklarla baş etmek için kullandığı bir eylem biçimi olarak kullandığını göstermektedir.

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Özellikle Çin, yatay eşitsizlikleri ve rejim güvensizliğini engellemek için BRI ile uluslararası ticari faaliyetleri güvence altına alarak iç hoşnutsuzluğu azaltmaya çalışmakta - iç sorunların uluslararası boyuta yansımaları azaltarak – böylelikle dış politika yoluyla rejim güvenliğini ve dış barışı güçlendirmeye çalışmaktadır.

Çalışmanın teorik arka planı Oyalayıcı Savaş Teorisi'ne dayandırılmaktadır ve bu makale akademik alanda Çin hakkında yapılan tartışmalarda görülen Çin'in yükselen bir güç olarak uluslararası güvenlik üzerindeki etkileri konusundaki eksikliklere katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kavramlar: Çin, Yol ve Kuşak Girişimi (BRI), Rejim Güvensizliği, Milliyetçilik, Oyalayıcı Savaş Teorisi

1. Introduction

China occupies a major part of the current discussions in international relations, foreign policy analysis, and global security studies. Scholarly arguments have centered on the role of China in our world today and whether the days ahead would be peaceful or hostile and perhaps conflict.¹ The importance of China today in world politics is undoubtedly as a result of its economic development which has had great externalities on all other spheres of the country. With the socialism with Chinese characteristics, or state capitalism and other similar names that combined international market economy and investment with the remnants of socialism, the Chinese state was magically transformed.²

The purpose of this paper is to discuss China's sources of regime insecurity, its impact on world peace and conflict and how the regime addresses these challenges through foreign policy. How does China's regime insecurity affect international relations, peace and conflict and how is it responding to such challenge in order not to disturb international peace and cooperation? How do China's public reactions affect international relations, conflict, peace and cooperation? To answer these related questions, the paper looks at China's domestic system and weakness to argue that, the regime's insecurity caused by strong nationalist emotions and domestic discontents is a potential source of impediment on world peace than its external strength. By using a foreign policy initiative and primary sources, the paper takes

¹ Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Rise and International Regimes: Does China Seek to Overthrow Global Norms?," in *China in the Era of Xi Jinping: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges*, eds. Robert S. Ross and Bekkevold Jo Inge (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 165-95; G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no.1 (2008): 30-33; Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011): 348-77.

² Jinping Xi, *The Governance of China II* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2017), 5-67; Ian Bremmer, *The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War between States and Corporations?* (New York: Portfolio, 2010), 4-6.



a counter-intuitive approach of the diversionary war theory to explain that, Beijing is aware and in fact dealing with this domestic challenge by providing for the international dimension of the domestic threat with economic gains. The paper shows that, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – as a foreign policy – is one course of action the Chinese regime addresses its internal challenges.

Specifically, China is strengthening regime security and external peace through foreign policy initiative – providing for the international dimension of the domestic threat – to try to decrease domestic discontents through securing international commercial activities intended to stem horizontal inequalities as well as insecurity caused by nationalist sentiments. This strategy is embodied in the BRI in two ways. The first is to use international commercial activities to eradicate domestic problems as much as possible such as to make the state and its people rich, and reduce income and regional inequalities. The second is to improve the development and growth of other countries, especially neighbors' economies, to have direct impacts on their publics' welfare and reduce their misperception and fear about China, to ward off negative international reactions caused by asymmetric development that could produce counter nationalist reactions at home that the Chinese regime cannot back down on. One caveat needs to be noted: the paper does not argue that BRI is related to diversionary war theory but explains however that, commercial or economic activities through the BRI provides a platform for China to counter the threat diversionary war theory poses. In effect, it is more related to the neoliberal economic interdependence and how it dismisses the diversionary war theory in relations to China.³ Apart from adding to the existing literature on economic interdependence and diversionary war, the paper helps fill the gap in the discussion of China and international security which has been dominated by China's rise in power capabilities. It also has policy relevance for policy makers, gives indications into China's foreign policy implications and how to deal with the country.

The discussion on China has predominantly been limited to its strength and growth in international power capabilities, insisting greater assertiveness. Martin Jacques is largely epitomized with the idea that as China's external power grows, it will seek to shape the world in its image and rule it and this phenomenon is inevitable.⁴ Reinforcing the argument for

³ I thank the journal's anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention for further clarification.

⁴ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin, 2009).



greater assertiveness and China's desire to change the global system, Shaun Breslin wrote that "China wants to change its role in global politics, and that the emphasis on keeping a low international profile that informed Chinese policy from the 1980s onwards is giving way to a more activist inclination."⁵ In line with the power transition theory, Avery Goldstein argued that as China external strength growth through accumulation of material capabilities, it would likely become belligerent due to the benefits aggression offers.⁶ Denny Roy had also predicted that, a future wealthy China would lead to security challenges and undermine peace in Asia Pacific because it would likely use force acquired through its material capabilities to challenge established regional powers like Japan.⁷ According to Aaron Friedberg, the shift in China's foreign policy towards more assertiveness can be found in Chinese leaders' mindset and perception because "as their country has grown stronger, they have felt empowered to move back toward the position of centrality and influence to which they believe history entitles them."⁸

Offensive realism also focuses on China's external strength and material capabilities to assert that, it is more likely to pursue territorial expansion to achieve regional hegemony as a means of acquiring security that would lead to armed conflicts and perhaps war.⁹ The argument is that a wealthy China would be an aggressive state determined to achieve at least a regional hegemony because:

A China that is much more powerful than any of its neighbors will be in a good position to use military threat to force the other side to accept a deal largely on China's terms [or] ... unsheathe the sword and go to war to get its way.¹⁰

Based on China's economic growth and military development, Aaron Friedberg argued that China has grown in capacity to compete or engage in rivalry with the US for external power and influence and if the US does not work to ensure its position, it would be pushed aside by

⁵ Shaun Breslin, "China and the Global Order: Signaling Threat of Friendship," *International Affairs* 89, no.3 (2013): 615.

⁶ Avery Goldstein, "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4-5 (2007): 647-49.

⁷ Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *International Security* 19, no.1 (1994): 149-50.

⁸ Aaron Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2015): 136.

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160-62.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2014), 376.



China.¹¹ Undoubtedly, such push could be violent that would disturb global peace. It is this argument that offensive realism generally drives forward. Viewing it from the lenses of conflict and war, it is thus more generally pessimistic about China's growth and external influence. John Mearsheimer believes that:

If China becomes an economic powerhouse it will most certainly translate its economic might into military and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia.... Of course, neither its neighbors nor the United States would stand idly by while China gained increasing increments of power.... In short, China and the United States are destined to be adversaries if China's power grows.¹²

Neoliberals however reach a contrary conclusion and more optimistic about China's growth when the same external strength and material capabilities are used. The argument is that the material benefits China accrues from extended economic interdependence and the cost aggression would have on such benefits would induce China to remain a status quo power and peaceful.¹³ M. Taylor Fravel is also optimistic of China's peaceful rise because the size and scope of the perceived benefits of aggression in relation to China is less than the potential costs of conflicts.¹⁴ Alastair Johnston however believes that the assertive Chinese argument itself is incorrect because China's current foreign policy behavior is not as assertive as others describe it as the new assertiveness ascribed to it understates its past foreign behavior and generally overstate its current one because there hasn't been any significant change in China's foreign policy behavior.¹⁵ Similar opinion is opined by Schweller and Pu that "China seeks a gradual modification of Pax Americana, not a direct challenge to it."¹⁶ This means that China might not be generally happy with the status quo and likely to voice its concerns and push for the necessary changes in responsible manner but not necessarily behaving as a revisionist power to destabilize the international system with violence. According to Mingjiang Li, rather

¹¹ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 157–80.

¹² Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 4.

¹³ John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China: Power, Institutions, and the Western Order," in *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 91–97.

¹⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 509.

¹⁵ Alastair Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 32–35.

¹⁶ Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After unipolarity: China's visions of International Order in an Era Decline," *International Security* 36, no.1 (2011): 53.



than China changing the system, it will become more proactive and increase its influence in regional and global multilateralism as various constraints will hinder it from completely overhauling the established system and the multilateral architecture and will likely repeat past practices including “increasing participation and engagement, pushing for cooperation in areas that would serve Chinese interests, avoiding the assumption of responsibilities that it deems burdensome, blocking initiatives that are seen as harmful to its interests.”¹⁷

The problem with all these arguments is that, discussions on how China is likely to act in the longer term is characterized solely by its external strength made possible by accumulation of material capabilities. This paper took an opposite approach – internal weakness. Susan Shirk in 2008 also studied China’s internal weakness and asserted that the threat of global conflict in relation to China comes from China’s regime insecurity rather than external strength, and that “it is China’s internal fragility, not its economic or military strength that presents the greatest danger to us.”¹⁸ In effect, her central proposition was that regime insecurity is a major source of a U.S.–China clash. Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbeey in 2020 also argued that China’s internal weakness – regime insecurity – caused by strong nationalism is likely to force the regime into a premature hegemonic war.¹⁹ This paper also followed this path and studied the subject from the inside and explained that, although internal weakness is a potential source of conflict as leaders could divert their problems outside through nationalism, China’s shrewd foreign policy initiative would help Chinese leaders to mitigate likely external conflicts and seek external peace, contrary to the assertion of diversionary theory.

The next section will look at the diversionary war theory and its application. The third section discusses some domestic sources of discontent that could engender regime insecurity and serve as sources of diversionary war tactics. The paper then assesses some likely conditions of great power clash involving China and the United States and its allies in section four. Section five discusses China’s foreign policy initiative intended to mitigate the threat of international conflict – the BRI – and how such initiative or method is being used by the regime to neutralize its domestic insecurity. The final section offers conclusion.

¹⁷ Mingjiang Li, “Rising from Within: China’s Search for a Multilateral World and its Implications for Sino-US Relations,” *Global Governance* 17, no.3 (2011): 334.

¹⁸ Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁹ Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbeey, “Hegemonic Theory is not Dead: Regime Survival and Premature Hegemonic War – Impact of China’s Economic Rise on the International System,” *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict* 8, no.1 (2020): 19-20.



2. Diversionary Theory of War

Diversionary war theory argues that there is a correlation between domestic strife and their external behaviors or foreign policy. It explains that when leaders face domestic threats to their rule, they divert domestic attention outside by provoking conflicts and confrontation with other states for the purposes of securing their office through rally-around-the flag, scapegoating or gamble for resurrection.²⁰ Diversionary war basically discusses the effects of domestic political variables on external war. Levy (1988) set forth the idea that under certain conditions, public support of assertive national policies, especially when such policies are linked to the survival of an in-group, help decision makers to embark on aggressive external behavior or war as a means to increase or maintain regime survival, and that, a recognition of such role domestic factors play on wars would increase the explanatory powers and framework of individual wars.²¹ Various qualitative researches based on historical and case studies analyses have found instances where domestic strife have encouraged leaders to provoke conflict abroad in order to bolster their position at home.²²

Some scholars have shown that, a particular type of domestic strife – contested political institution – provides the condition under which the military will agree to use force abroad, and that, in the absence of such contestation, militaries would not be deceived by politicians' diversionary tactics.²³ Critics charge that such tactics can only be possible under a condition of a minimal prior national unity because when a country is internally divided, leaders will avoid creating additional problems such as civil conflict. Diversionary war explanations have evolved with time. Despite the huge popularity of the theory and some evidences shown in the United States' foreign policy, broader empirical support has remained elusive.²⁴ Patrick James therefore concluded that “seldom has so much common sense in

²⁰ Clifton T. Morgan and Kenneth N. Bickers, “Domestic Discontent and the External use of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no.1 (1992): 26-7; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson and Gary Woller, “War and the Fate of Regimes: A Comparative Analysis,” *The American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3(1992): 638-39.

²¹ Jack Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 666 –68.

²² Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crises* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 169-90; Jack Levy and Lily Vakili, “Diversionary Action by Authoritarian Regimes: Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas Case,” in *the Internationalization of Communal Strife*, ed. Manus I. Midlarsky (New York: Routledge, 1992), 135-36.

²³ Kurt Dassel, “Civilians, Soldiers, and Strife: Domestic Sources of International Aggression,” *International Security* 23, no. 1(1998): 113–14; Kurt Dassel and Eric Reinhardt, “Domestic Strife and the Initiation of Violence at Home and Abroad,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no.1 (1999): 60–61.

²⁴ Karl R. DeRouen, “Presidents and the Diversionary Use of Force: Research Note,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2000): 317–28.



theory found so little support in practice.”²⁵ Jaroslav Tir argued that, the lack of empirical support for the theory is due to its under specification of the mechanism under which the public reacts to a particular issue and this could be addressed by “territorial diversion” – “the possibility that the embattled leader may anticipate achieving their diversionary aims specifically through the initiation of territorial conflict.”²⁶ Instead of generating foreign policy crisis, one scholar however argued that internal problems could also create conditions for external cooperation and peace because “embattled leaders are willing to cooperate with other states in exchange for assistance” to deal with problems at home, and that, China’s regime insecurity or vulnerability is the reason why China settled many of its territorial disputes or attempted to compromise on them.²⁷ Chiozza and Goemans in 2003 also rejected the theory and argued instead that war initiation rather decreases with the risk of losing office and an increase in the risk of external conflict makes leaders prone to losing power.²⁸ This is because citizens generally do not like war as it is an event most likely to jeopardize welfare.

As a unit, Chinese public is one of the most internally cohesive nations which mean that, the condition of a minimal prior unity is less significant. Moreover, Chinese leaders, especially the less confident ones have over the years enjoyed significant support by fanning the fires of nationalism.²⁹ The regime is also insecure due to its political system and other domestic discontents, the basis some have predicted a coming upheaval.³⁰ These features make China a potential case of diversionary theory. However, as would be shown in this paper below, China’s trajectory is likely to elicit peace instead of war. The analysis I explored in this paper shows that shrewd foreign policy initiative that supports neoliberal’s economic interdependence can annul diversionary theory of war.

²⁵ Patrick James, “Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 22, no.1 (1987): 22.

²⁶ Jaroslav Tir, “Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict,” *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 413.

²⁷ M. Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security* 30, no.2 (2005): 49.

²⁸ Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, “Peace through Insecurity: Tenure and International Conflict,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no.4 (2003): 453-56.

²⁹ Shirk, *China*, 77-98, 144-157 and 185-188.

³⁰ Minxin Pei, “China’s Coming Upheaval: Competition, the Coronavirus, and the Weakness of Xi Jinping,” *Foreign Affairs* (2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-03/chinas-coming-upheaval>.



3. Sources of Public Discontent

Dissent or rebellion emerges when some people or groups are unhappy with the general state of affairs as the debate between grievance and greed associated with civil conflict has shown.³¹ The problem for the Beijing regime is that, it presides over an extremely large territory and population where issues that can cause grievances and greed are highly common. A natural disaster can strike in the south while artificial ones such as building collapse can come from anywhere; infectious diseases could breakout; ethnic and religious protest could emerge from the west; farmers protest and agitation could emerge from the north; and students or graduate protest could come from the capitals. China's Communist Party is seen from outside as a strong party that has a firm grip on the state and the 1.4 billion citizens with a combination of economic development and force. However, situations in Beijing might not be exactly what is seen from outside because China's Communist leaders face some domestic problems that could at any time usher in conflict and derail the country's peaceful rise. According to Susan Shirk, China is stronger and more secure internationally now than it has ever been since the nineteenth century, but domestically, its leaders have a deep sense of insecurity.³²

3.1. Socio-economic Discontent

The Chinese economy has experienced magical rise and delivered many of its people out of poverty. Poverty line has reduced to 8% by 2001 from 53% in 1980 and it is estimated that by 2029, China will overtake the US in GDP, although it has already overtaken it in other respects. Despite these, there is a concentration of national wealth among relatively small group of economic elites – high-net-worth and ultra-high-net worth – who enjoy significant government protection, while majority of the people are still poor. Income inequality is a major source of discontent in the country. According to John Knight in 2014, this was consciously created by the Chinese regime to provide incentives essential for the transition from centrally planned to a private-sector-market economy.³³ However, Martin King Whyte argued that it is the legacy of China's system of centrally planned socialism before the economic reform because a series of institutions and policies that were put in place at the

³¹ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 570.

³² Shirk, *China*, 6.

³³ John Knight, "Inequality in China: An Overview," *The World Bank Research* 29, no. 1 (2014): 1.



socialist era, later obstructed linkages and spread of benefits across spectrums.³⁴ By 2007, China was joint highest inequality in Asia.³⁵ Income inequality has increased over the years especially during the reform periods. The increase could be attributed to the newly introduced rewards for productivity and efficiency which replaced the erstwhile 'danwei' (work units) system where a kind of welfare unit provided employment, healthcare, pension, housing, etc.³⁶

The *hukou* (residence registration) system is also a major source of discrimination, inequality, poverty and discontent. *Hukou* enjoins rural-urban migrants to retain their identity. Maintenance of *hukou* means that people who possess an urban one from birth or able to illegally purchase one are entitled to improved rights and privileges and public services including better schooling, employment, etc. while other citizens become second-class in various cities with its associated injustices. Without *hukou* and *danwei*, rural migrants to the city cannot obtain employment or establish a better life. However, the availability of many companies and work avenues today has theoretically reduced the significance of *danwei*, although it still exists in mind-sets and certain institutional practices. There also exist significant regional inequalities. Fiscal decentralization and trade liberalization contributed to regional inequalities. These dual policies enabled richer coastal provinces to increase their revenues and also enjoy preferential central government treatment that enhanced rapid growth and economic development at the expense of the hinterlands.³⁷ A particularly worrisome situation is the abject underdevelopment and inequalities of the Uighur Muslims dominated Xinjiang in Western China and dissatisfaction it engenders.³⁸ Regional inequalities have effect on household and individual inequalities.

Chinese income grew steadily between 1990 and 2010. However, life satisfaction was not higher in 2010 than it had been in the 1990s.³⁹ There is still high unemployment with

³⁴ Martin King Whyte, "Soaring Income Gaps: China in Comparative Perspective," *Daedalus* 143, no. 2 (2014): 45.

³⁵ Knight, "Inequality in China," 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

³⁷ Shenggen Fan, Ravi Kanbur and Xiaobo Zhang, "China's Regional Disparities: Experience and Policy," *Review of Development Finance* 1, no. 1 (2011): 48-54; Ravi Kanbur and Xiaobo Zhang, "Fifty Years of Regional Inequality in China: A Journey Through Central Planning, Reform and Openness," *Review of Development Economics* 9, no. 1 (2005): 90-93.

³⁸ Flynt Leverett and Wu Bingbing, "The New Silk Road and China's Evolving Grand Strategy," *The China Journal* 77, no. 1 (2016): 118.

³⁹ Richard Easterlin, et al, "China's Life Satisfaction, 1990-2010," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 25 (2012): 9776.



correlated discontents and the effects of the global pandemic – COVID-19 – is sure to exacerbate it with youth unemployment and redundancy. Youth employment is most often tied to ‘*guanxi*’ (interpersonal relationship) whereby family ties, entrepreneurs, business ventures, social and political networks are intertwined, and that, kin or associates are tapped for favors with an understanding of future reciprocity. An individual’s business or ability to get a job may rests with the personal networks around him starting with the family and then clans, cliques and the most important ‘*guanxi*’ are government officials including even the police. This obviously breeds corruption and discrimination. Inequality has resulted from these increasing discrimination, favoritism and nepotism, segmentation and corruption.⁴⁰

Government inability to prevent growing unemployment, redundancy, and inequality is a potential source of social discontent and rebellion. Nothing scares the regime more than disgruntled unemployed college graduates possibly acting as dis-stability forces of society. Income inequality and poverty has a direct effect on other sectors of the state. Concerns over the environment cannot be dismissed. In a field research that Justin Zackey conducted in 2007, he found that relative deprivation among rural poor has encouraged poor environmental practices such as illegal tree cutting.⁴¹ The regime is under pressure to improve pollution and other environmental related problems which is also becoming a major source of civil unrest especially following air pollution in in Beijing and other major cities in 2013.⁴²

3.2. Political Discontent

Inasmuch as the mass media is an effective tool for national development, a loss of control over it can produce disastrous consequences especially for authoritarian regimes. Even a small sample of information about local or political problems could provide enough information to shape public perspective. Hence, the Chinese regime has tried its best over the years to stifle independent public criticism and analysis with many issues regarded as sensitive. The success of Beijing since Chairman Mao had depended on censorship, with varying strategies depending on the specific leader. Although an authoritarian regime, and

⁴⁰ John Knight and Linda Yueh, “The Role of Social Capital in the Labour Market in China,” *Economics of Transition* 16, no. 3 (2008): 389; John Knight and L. Song, “China’s Emerging Wage Structure, 1995-2002,” in *Inequality and Public Policy in China*, eds. Bjorn Gustafsson, Li Shi and Terry Sicular (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 225-30.

⁴¹ Justin Zackey, “Peasant Perspectives on Deforestation in Southwest China: Social Discontent and Environmental Mismanagement,” *Mountain Research and Development* 27, no. 2 (2007): 156–58.

⁴² “Chinese Anger over Pollution Becomes Main Cause of Social Unrest,” *Bloomberg* (2013), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-06/pollution-passes-land-grievances-as-main-spark-of-china-protests>.



knowing how bad effect the internet could have on the regime, it actively promoted and expanded it but simultaneously developed effective mechanism to control online information. Currently, President Xi's regime seems to have mastered this trade with information censorship and surveillance aided by a highly wired society. When social tensions are high such as the initial stages of COVID-19 outbreak, more news are censored to keep the level of discontent low because a revolt or even a revolution could occur if media report and public knowledge indicate a widespread support for discontent.

Political control over opinions and speeches and all forms of information sharing and possible consequences in case of a breach including jail terms and even death, engender fear to an important extent. Public media serve as the mouthpiece of the party and criticism is hardly allowed. Political repression and control has had some disastrous results. For example, the Great Leap Forward program resulted in death of starvation of about 30 million people during Mao's era due to local officials fear to report actual levels of grain production to the center.⁴³ COVID-19 is also a crucial example of today. China's regime initial bungling of the outbreak characterized by information censorship and surveillance coupled with punishment of whistleblowers might have created the conditions for the virus's global spread.

Steve Hess explained in 2016 that, even affluent Chinese who have preferential treatment and given opportunities to influence policies to ensure the protection of their businesses against unfavorable policies such as redistribution of income demands from the rural working class and urban poor, sometimes choose to exit instead of voicing out due to the relative safety of their assets at home and threat on personal security due to the unpredictable nature of the authoritarian regime. The nature of the regime means that economic freedom including measures for private property rights, and legal protections are not strong, affecting the general view of the business climate.⁴⁴ The World Bank Ease of Doing Business (2020) ranked China as 31st indicating that business climate in China is still challenging and this could be attributed to the regime.⁴⁵ The opaque nature of society, government and political activities and its immunization from criticism help to grow political corruption to an important degree. Politicians, especially at the local levels abuse offices to accumulate wealth

⁴³ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 137.

⁴⁴ Steve Hess, "The Flight of the Affluent in Contemporary China," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 4 (2016): 642.

⁴⁵ The World Bank, "The World Bank Ease of Doing Business Rankings, 2020," (2017), <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings> (12.06.2020).



which they transfer to relatives abroad. Since mid-1990s, about 18,000 corrupt officials fled abroad to enjoy their illegally acquired wealth, taking with them about US\$123 billion.⁴⁶

Due to years of fanning nationalism through school textbooks and media to gain popular support, it is important to note that some key domestic grievances are sourced from some key foreign policies concerning Japan, Taiwan, the United States and many of its Asian regional allies and this is a source of domestic threat and international conflict. These grievances are foreign-turned-domestic challenges caused by strong nationalist emotions towards certain foreign policies of these countries. On Taiwan, the nationalism of the island for independence and the strong unification nationalism of the mainland have a tendency to threaten conflict between China and the United States and its allies and this is a major source of Beijing's insecurity. Chinese leaders can "contemplate risking war with the United States ...just to hold onto this small island... not because Taiwan is a threat to China's national security" but "the roots of the Chinese fixation on Taiwan are purely domestic, related to regime security, not national security."⁴⁷ With the United States, Chinese perception of American hegemonies and arrogance is the source of nationalist emotions against Americans. A Chinese nationalist sentiment against Japan that, Japan must apologize for its atrocities committed during its historical occupation in China is the most difficult for them to deal with.⁴⁸ These strong nationalist emotions were once stimulated by the leaders themselves to achieve public support but have now reached a point where it is difficult to control or back down; a tipping point where backing down means a popular protest could overthrow them.⁴⁹

4. Threat of International Conflict

The threat of major powers confrontation or conflict that could involve the United States or its allies on one hand and China on the other is a major concern to contemporary scholars.⁵⁰ A confrontation or conflict between the major players of the global political economy would greatly affect everybody thus a "cooperative US-China relationship [is] essential to global stability and peace."⁵¹ It is unlikely to find a direct issue that could send

⁴⁶ Hess, "The Flight," 644.

⁴⁷ Shirk, *China*, 185.

⁴⁸ Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 15.

⁴⁹ Shirk, *China*, 7.

⁵⁰ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 158–184.

⁵¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 372.



both the US and China to a confrontation with each other. However, various attachments of the United States through friendship or alliance commitments such as Taiwan, Japan, India, the Philippines, etc. provide various avenues for confrontation.

The Chinese regime identifies domestic peace, stability and the survival of the Communist party within the happiness of the country's population with economic development and social infrastructure. We tend to believe that, well-being and happiness increase with economic growth, and that, as China's economy grows steadily, Chinese well-being and happiness will correspondingly increase. However, China does not rank high in various rankings reported by the World Happiness Report: 27th, 28th and 30th percentiles respectively, for quality of life, life satisfaction and happiness.⁵² By analyzing the link between social environment including institutions, and human well-being, the World Happiness Report, 2020 shows there is a strong correlation between higher level of interpersonal and institutional trust and subjective well-being, and China ranked 94th out of 153 countries (2017–2019) on happiness.⁵³ This means that, although the economy is the highest in the world, domestic discontents discussed above impede public happiness.

It is natural for Chinese leaders to look outside for regular sources of resources needed for development and reducing inequalities, for example energy – oil and gas – because their lack thereof would spark the remote issues of public discontents to pave way for a mass protest movement to rise up and overthrow them. The sea lanes between the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf for example, are highly important. It is important for global leaders to wear the shoes of Chinese leaders to attempt to understand their fears and concerns because their priority will always be the preservation of Communist Party rule and not international considerations. However, global powers do not share this Chinese leaders concern but are concerned with the economic and relative gains of China. Heeding to the advice of Mearsheimer's offensive realism, global powers view Chinese actions as expansionist and aim to build coalitions to counterbalance China's foreign policy, thus engendering some form of security dilemma. Countries such as India, Japan, Australia and the United States are for example, forming various bilateral, regional, and multilateral security cooperation on global issues, including maritime security, "comprehensive economic engagement, stronger defense

⁵² Knight, "Inequality in China," 10.

⁵³ John F. Helliwell, et al., "Social Environment for World Happiness," in *World Happiness Report 2020*, eds. John F. Helliwell, et al. (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020), 14, 20, <https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/WHR20.pdf>.



relations and greater technological cooperation” in order to counterbalance China’s interest.⁵⁴ India’s navy for example patrols the sea routes of the world’s energy superhighway that connects oil and gas of the Persian Gulf to the economies of East Asia to check Chinese interests.⁵⁵ The current border tensions between China and India leading to deaths at both sides could arouse nationalist emotions backed by domestic discontents that the Chinese regime cannot back down.

India is without doubt the most worried Asia Pacific state about China’s new found strength in economics and material capabilities. Having one hand on Sri Lanka through Hambantota port, India is very much concerned about encirclement through Chinese investments in places such as Pakistan – India rival – Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, etc. China’s string of pearls policy of setting up military facilities in India’s neighborhood is undoubtedly engendering encirclement fears in India, thus, inching closer to Chinese rivals including Australia, Japan, and the United States in an emerging quadrilateral alliance.⁵⁶

China has issues of conflict especially on territory and behavior with many countries in Asia Pacific. It rivals with Japan over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Australia expresses concerns about China’s behavior especially the militarization of islands in the South China Sea. These have led to coalitions of Asia Pacific’s democratic countries. India and Japan relationship which started in the 2000s has grown from strategic and global partnership to declaration in security cooperation, and by 2012, both had begun engagements in joint naval exercises. Concerns over non-traditional security and China threats in Asia-Pacific brought Japan and Australia together in a bilateral security cooperation. According to Amy King Japan recognizes Australia as the most important security partner behind the US.⁵⁷ Australia-India security cooperation completes the linkage among the democratic powers within the Asia-Pacific region. For example, India plans to invite Australian Navy for the annual Malabar naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal that includes the US and Japan.⁵⁸ These

⁵⁴ HDP Envall, “JAPAN’S INDIA ENGAGEMENT: From Different Worlds to Strategic Partners,” in *The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses*, ed. Ian Hall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 46.

⁵⁵ Madhuchanda Ghosh, “India and Japan's Growing Synergy: From a Political to a Strategic Focus,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 2 (2008): 287.

⁵⁶ Shaun Randol, “How to Approach the Elephant: Chinese Perceptions of India in the Twenty-First Century,” *Asian Affairs* 34, no. 4 (2008): 292.

⁵⁷ Amy King, “Japan in Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper,” *Security Challenges* 12, no. 1 (2016): 177-78.

⁵⁸ Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Archana Chaudhary, “In Clear Message to China, India to Invite Australian Navy for Malabar Drill,” *The Economic Times* (2020), <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/in-clear-message-to-china-india-to-invite-australian-navy-for-malabar-drill/articleshow/76885282.cms>.



countries are linked by the US in a defense partnership – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – initiated in 2007, resurrected in 2015 and enhanced in 2017.

Alliance commitment means that, states are not only to support each other diplomatically but also military and security commitments where one country should be willing to commit its troops in aid of another in times of trouble. Entrapment would mean that in an unfortunate scenario of China's clash with any of the Pacific powers or even other minor countries, Asia Pacific states risk been entangled in their partner's conflict and China carries the burden of having to face not only one country.

5. International Remedy of Domestic Insecurity

China's domestic factors play important role in assessing global security in relation to China. According to Frances Stewart widening "horizontal inequalities" associated with differences in access to assets, income and employment, social services, political opportunities and power, recognition of religion, languages, norms, values and practices could lead to dissent, rebellion and perhaps conflicts.⁵⁹ It is important to note that, the threat to the regime might not only come from the ordinary poor and the social riffraff but also the growing middle class and intellectuals. However, the argument is that, the poor who has less incentive in the stability of the state are most dangerous, and that, as people become richer and inequality reduces, regime insecurity and conflict could correspondingly reduce. Discontents discussed in section three could potentially engender revolts which could be linked with the threat of international conflict discussed in section four above. However, Chinese leaders have two choices: either to fan nationalism that would provoke external conflict to maintain support or initiate policies to bring peace at home and abroad. Since nationalism has always worked and served as a roadmap, one would not be wrong to assume that they would go for the former because it is unnecessary to change a winning strategy.

Power transition, offensive realism, and diversionary theorists would respectively opt for territorial expansion due to perceived benefits of aggression, and fan nationalism that provokes external conflict to scapegoat and maintain public support. Thomas Ameyaw-Brobby wrote in 2020 that:

When pushed into corner by assertive nationalism against Taiwan and Japan [coupled with the underlying socio-economic and political discontents], Chinese leaders are

⁵⁹ Frances Stewart, *Horizontal Inequality and Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 18-19.



likely to choose conflict than refraining from it even if it involves the likelihood of US military intervention because it is more related to regime security than national security.⁶⁰

Like every regime, the Communist leadership is concerned first with its own survival, and that, refraining from conflict would be a more costly distraction because, it would be interpreted by Chinese public as a weak government that could not defend the nation against foreign aggression.⁶¹ Smart leadership and diplomacy is needed to solve these issues. Chinese leaders have chosen to avoid this scenario altogether with preemptive measures that seek to initiate peace at home and abroad through commercial activities embodied in the BRI.

5.1. Achieving Rejuvenation at Home

Chinese leadership hopes to achieve security at home through prosperity of its people in what it calls the “Chinese Dream” where better education, stable jobs with higher income, reliable social security and pension scheme, improved housing and medical care, etc. would be achieved.⁶² Beijing hopes that by 2021, the whole of the Chinese society will be a moderate prosperous one, and that, by 2049 China would be a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious.”⁶³ This suggests that, there are plans to reduce or eliminate inequalities. Achieving rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is linked with the prosperity of the state because people lives can only improve when the country is doing well. Achieving rejuvenation at home through social and economic empowerment and reduction of inequality is a way that Chinese Communist leaders have opted to control internal dissent because the old ways of doing things – fanning nationalism – is not a lasting solution especially with the growth of internet and increasing highly educated society. However, how can growth at home be sustained? How is Beijing controlling the international challenges that can prompt nationalist sentiments to spark domestic rebellion? The Chinese government has initiated a foreign policy – BRI – to serve this dual purpose.

The BRI would finance the development of infrastructure that would serve as trade routes and connectivity facilitator to link China and the rest of the world by land with roads and railways – from China through Eurasia and Russia to Europe; from China to the Middle

⁶⁰ Ameyaw-Brobbe, “Hegemonic Theory,” 20.

⁶¹ Shirk, *China*, 7.

⁶² Jinping Xi, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2014), 37–38.

⁶³ *Ibid.*



East through Central Asia, Iran and Turkey and finally link China with South and Southeast Asia; all through the Silk Road Economic Belt – and by the sea through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road that would utilize the Pacific, Indian and Mediterranean Oceans to link Africa, Europe and the rest of Asia with China.⁶⁴ It operates six interrelated routes and corridors including the New Eurasia Land Bridge – connecting China to the Netherlands; China, Mongolia and Russia route; China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor; China and Indochina Peninsula route; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor.⁶⁵ The BRI has emerged as a signature foreign policy of President Xi Jinping which reflects the March Westward strategy of China's development.⁶⁶

However, one major global concern is the debt trap argument of the program resulting from its implementation strategy of lending to poor countries for infrastructure that could create debt pile up, repayment and sustainability problems.⁶⁷ The BRI is a Chinese grand strategy to solve the regime's insecurity discussed above. Grand strategy could be defined as the “culturally shaped intellectual architecture that structures a nation's foreign policy over time.”⁶⁸ The aim of a grand strategy is to protect territory, political integrity and legitimacy. It is the state's means of causing the best security for itself and in China, the regimes is using the BRI to cause this security for itself. The objective of China's development and the whole idea of achieving rejuvenation and prosperity of the Chinese nation are to mitigate horizontal inequalities and tame nationalistic sentiments – considered as dangerous to the regime. However, this grand strategy would depend on sources of natural resources especially power and energy security – oil and gas.

Technology and manufacturing are major parts of China's development that hopes to bridge the societal gap. The growing population needs constant sources of energy to keep

⁶⁴ Xi, The Governance II, 543–65.

⁶⁵ “The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” *Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) Research* (2018), <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X3CGF6L/1X0A36B7.htm>.

⁶⁶ Wang Jisi, “China in the Middle,” *The American Interes* (2015), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/02/china-in-the-middle/> (27.05.2019); Yun Sun, “March West: China's Response to the U.S. Rebalancing,” *Up Front (Brookings Institution)* (2013), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing/> (27.05.2019).

⁶⁷ Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbe, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Debt Trap and its Implication on International Security,” *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 75-77; John Hurley, Scott Morris and Gailyn Portelance, *Examining the debt implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a policy perspective*, CGD Policy Paper (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2018), 6-11, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-roadinitiative-policy-perspective>.

⁶⁸ Leverett and Bingbing, “The New Silk Road,” 112.



businesses running to sustain the growing economy. China's development and preservation of the Communist Party needs resources which entails securing cheap sources of energy and vast raw materials for industrial use through BRI. In essence, China is using the BRI to look for new exits for sustained economic growth in a new normal state because it is the most important factor for maintaining stability and garnering support from the people. BRI would enable China have easier access to the world's energy producing areas through the various economic corridors. For example, the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor which embodies railways from Xinjiang in China through to Central and Western Asia to connect Arabian Peninsula and Mediterranean Sea would enable China to position itself to the rich energy resources of the Middle East and Central Asia. Similarly, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that would connect Kashgar, China to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan would be a good transit point for energy resources and raw materials from Africa. China needs resources from Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East and as a result, the sea lanes between the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf become important which the BRI would ensure that China becomes active in these areas to exploit. This does not mean that the country will bully others and forcefully take their resources but is to say that iterated economic engagement made possible by BRI, would enhance greater accessibility.

BRI could be seen as a perfect extension of Jiang Zemin's 'go-out' policy where Chinese firms were encouraged to go abroad to invest, trade, acquire skills, technology, experience as well as establish international presence. Enterprises as well as science and technology research institutes were encouraged to expand their investments and operations abroad, achieve transnational outlook by forming large internationally competitive companies so that they could take advantage of domestic and foreign markets. This was to enable them "increase export of goods and labor services and bring about a number of strong multinational enterprises and brand names."⁶⁹ BRI gives the Chinese government, investors and companies' foreign markets in Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe to invest Chinese capital in a similar way that Britain pursued during the peak of its industrial revolution. Access to these resources will sustain China's economic growth needed to sustain Chinese businesses and prosperity and comfortable life.

⁶⁹ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 138–39.



These new markets would not only be places for investment but where Chinese companies would have significant presence to sell their products as Britain dealt with the market saturation problem that the industrial revolution brought.⁷⁰ In Africa for example, BRI gives support to the Trans African Highways which aims to ensure African connectivity.⁷¹ This would enable Chinese investments to have access to African markets to sell manufactured products and open up businesses. Other economic corridors such as the New Eurasia Land Bridge and China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor for example, would help ease Chinese access to European markets. The result of these apart from improving the life of people at these centers is increasing the prosperity of the Chinese people, reducing inequality and ensuring stability.

It is not incorrect to assert that, tensions that come from Xinjiang province, for example, are partly related to its economic underdevelopment. Therefore, the March Westward strategy through BRI would be “an improved foreign geostrategy to support the overall western development strategy” which would help China to deal with the unrest from Xinjiang and its underdevelopment related problems.⁷² The Xinjiang Province specifically would benefit directly from BRI through the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that would connect Kashgar to the Gwadar port to help reduce income and regional inequality in the province.

5.2. Achieving Harmony Abroad

It should be reiterated that some Chinese foreign policies have turned domestic politics and shape public domestic reaction. The plan is to use BRI to cut off hostile international reactions from neighboring countries that could draw in more powerful countries such as the United States and its allies that could induce domestic counter nationalist reactions. Brantly Womack believes that the relationship between China and its neighbors, some of whom are either friends or formal allies with the United States is asymmetric – a situation caused by differentiated developments. This asymmetric relationship could breed a vicious

⁷⁰ Jefferson E. Murphy, *History of African Civilization* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), 296–301.

⁷¹ The African Development Bank Group, *Review of the Implementation Status of the Trans African Highways and the Missing Links* (Volume 1: Main Report, Final Report) (Stockholm: SWECO International AB and Sweden Nordic Consulting Group AB, Sweden, 2003), [https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/00473235-EN-TAH-FINAL-VOL1.PDF_\(13.02.2018\)](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/00473235-EN-TAH-FINAL-VOL1.PDF_(13.02.2018)).

⁷² Leverett and Bingbing, “The New Silk Road,” 126.



cycle of systemic misperception.⁷³ Many of China's neighbors are suspicious of Chinese foreign policies evidenced in recent increasing tensions over the South China Seas and other border related disputes. Misperception could be managed by "minimizing potentially hot issues...by using rhetoric that emphasizes common interests."⁷⁴ One way China is applying this strategy is by creating opportunities for its Asian neighbors through BRI to allay their fears that would prevent them from reacting in a way that would receive Chinese nationalist counter reactions at home.

According to Randol (2008), "Chinese perceptions of India and its influence on Chinese foreign policy has repercussions that extend beyond China – they also affect policies in Southeast and Southern Asia, the Sino-Indian-American relationship, and the international system as a whole."⁷⁵ Nationalist emotions of Chinese play up in matters relating to its neighbors. For example, "when [the] media report on U.S.-Indian close relations, they may play up that the relations are aimed at China."⁷⁶ Chinese approach is to use BRI to create opportunities through unimpeded trade for neighbors to minimize their mistrust towards Chinese foreign policy. This would prevent international reactions that could spark Chinese nationalist emotions, whom themselves are harboring various forms of latent discontents that Chinese government would not be able to afford to back down.

For example, the current global pandemic – COVID-19 – although is affecting all economies including the major ones, those who are been affected most or whose most difficult times might not even have come yet and such difficulties could run long into the future, is the developing countries. Thus, the gap between rich and poor countries and peoples, is likely to exacerbate which could in tend affect the security of the Communist leadership. Even before the pandemic, global economic trends had particularly remained sluggish and had not fully recovered from the 2008 global economic crisis, at least from the perspective of Beijing. In essence, BRI is to rebalance global economic needs, particularly in the developing

⁷³ Brantly Womack, *China among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 2010), 423–57; Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: The Cases of China, Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): 93-97.

⁷⁴ Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 362.

⁷⁵ Randol, "How to Approach," 212.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 217.



world with an effective demand and supply to ensure that “development needs [are] more inclusive and balanced, and the gap between the rich and poor needs to be narrowed.”⁷⁷

From China’s point of view, its interest lies in providing more public goods to its neighbors through commercial activities embodied in the BRI which would enable the gap between rich and poor countries and peoples to be narrowed. Mistrust of Chinese foreign policy and the negative reactions it induces in neighbors could be explained from the disparity in levels of development. The BRI thus offers the chance to poorer neighbors countries “to board China’s express train of development, and help them realize their own development objective” through a mutually assured dependent trade and friendly contacts.⁷⁸ The important role neighbors’ play in Chinese domestic politics vis-à-vis shaping public reaction entails it needs to first focus on Asian countries and bridge the economic gap between Chinese and neighboring publics. This will enable Beijing to bring benefits to its neighbors to in tend solicit their supports.

Implementation of projects in the neighborhood such as Laos, Pakistan, Indonesia, Mongolia, among others intended to improve the social and economic developments of these countries have either been accelerated or completed. For example, despite COVID-19 pandemic which had either delayed or disrupted global economic and infrastructural activities, China through the BRI delivered on its promise with a shipment of the last four class-S14 diesel-electric multiple unit (DEMU) rolling-stock trains (a total of 40 carriages) to Sri Lanka on 12 April 2020, to improve economic development and mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic.⁷⁹ It must be iterated that these efforts are attempts by China to improve the local economies of other states to reduce misperceptions and reactions that would induce counter domestic reactions especially when some of these states are either formal allies or friends to bigger powers.

Through the BRI, China is also contributing to the human resource development of other countries especially its Asian neighbors. The central government each year provides numerous government scholarships to participating countries of BRI while local governments have also instituted Silk Road scholarship schemes for participating countries. According to the Ministry of Education, China P.R. in 2018, the number of scholarship

⁷⁷ Xi, *The Governance II*, 556.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 547.

⁷⁹ Marilyn Balcita, “BRI Sri Lanka Rail Project Arrives Early amid Mass Coronavirus Delays,” *HKTDC Research* (2020), <https://research.hktdc.com/en/article/NDExNDA1MTM4>, (03.05.2020).



students stood at 58,600 as of 2017.⁸⁰ These scholarship schemes through BRI enable foreign graduate students to undertake various academic researches on BRI and its related issues whiles China uses it as an opportunity to exercise its public diplomacy through various methods that help to socialize the future leaders of the developing countries. Ham Myungsik and Elaine Tolentino in 2018 argued that by co-opting and embracing the future elites of developing countries as friends, “the CSC program works to enhance China’s image, playing a considerable role in the socialization of its soft power and eventually reducing the less developed countries’ fear of China.”⁸¹ Thus, by fostering contacts, it will not be incorrect to state that BRI enhances China’s prospect of effective future cooperation with neighbors that fosters greater peace, especially when it is unlikely to find a direct issue that could send both the US and China to a confrontation with each other, if not through friends and allies.

6. Conclusion

Whiles rejecting realist theories including diversionary war, this paper used Chinese solutions to give support to the neoliberal economic interdependence theory that wealth creates conditions for peace.⁸² The basic argument of the economic interdependence theory is that when countries’ economies are inextricably bound to each other, where war would seriously damage their economies, they would prefer peace to war.⁸³ Publics today demand their leaders to improve their wellbeing and prosperity through economic growth, or else, they lose power. As a result, economic interdependence would encourage international friendship and create conditions of mutual dependence, common interest, absolute gains and understanding between people.⁸⁴ Accepting as valid the correlation between iterated commercial activities and peace, this paper altered the logic underpinning and widened the scope of indicators used in assessing this relationship. The addition is that, when ordinary publics become the reason for extended trade instead of states as has usually been the

⁸⁰ Ministry of Education, People’s Republic of China, “Growing Number of Foreign Students Choosing to Study in China for a Degree across Multiple Disciplines,” *Ministry of Education, China* (2018), http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201804/t20180403_332258.html, (16.08.2019).

⁸¹ Ham Myungsik and Elaine Tolentino, “Socialization of China’s Soft Power: Building Friendship through Potential Leaders,” *China: An International Journal* 16, no. 4 (2018): 48.

⁸² Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28.

⁸³ Dale Copeland, “Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations,” *International Security* 20, no. 2 (1996): 8–9; Dale Copeland, “Economic Interdependence and the Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations,” in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. John G. Ikenberry and M. Mastunduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 326–27.

⁸⁴ Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations (3rd ed.)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63.



discussion; similar result – peace – should be expected because by achieving people’s prosperity and happiness, regime security increases and diversionary tactics are avoided.

The analysis espoused in this paper holds that internal weaknesses modeled on discontents and nationalist emotions and Beijing’s survival are potential sources of external conflict. However, smart leadership from Beijing would mitigate this possibility with extended commercial activities through the BRI. Thus, China’s trajectory does not support realist theories such as power transition, offensive realism and diversionary war but reinforces the neoliberal argument of peace through economic interdependence. Before concluding, some caveats must be noted. This paper does not argue that diversionary war theory is false. However, it charges that the theory cannot be generalized because conditions such as environmental and political settings and periods are different among countries. The analysis here is limited to China, and that, does not generalize it to conditions and results elsewhere in relation to the theory. The analysis examined only one of several methods Beijing is using to address domestic insecurity and potential for external conflict, and that, does not also say that the BRI is the only viable method.

Other methods are been used to stem discontent. The regime’s idea of harmonious society is based on implementing policies that support rural dwellers such as the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees in 2006. School fees in compulsory education level were also abolished in 2007. To improve regional equality, preferential treatments in the form of economic and infrastructure development are given to the poorer regions. However, social security and pension schemes remain limited and poor, and that, government would need to introduce packages to improve this sector in its attempt to bridge inequality. Inequality is a major source of discontent, thus, the regime would benefit from redistribution of income although this could step on the feet of the economic elites – high-net-worth and ultra-high-net worth groups. However, the point I present is that, these other measures are not limitations to the argument I have presented here, and that, the effectiveness of all these solutions would need a stronger and lasting financial base which the BRI offers.

Some countries with historical disputes with China are within the BRI targets, and that, BRI would become an effective arbiter. In essence, BRI has the capacity to expand the GDP of Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, etc. through expansion of infrastructural facilities and networks including ports and transportation that enhance trade.



Brunei – dispute with China – for example hopes to achieve diversification from oil dependence and BRI's assistance with agriculture including rice and fishery is important to ease disputes. Whiles Myanmar is important for China as alternative transportation corridor for natural energy; it stands to build a buoyant economy with the development of ports and railways.⁸⁵ The reopening of Sri Lanka rails in April 2019 is helping connect coastal and inland towns. Aside the general benefits states will derive, all these measures would improve the personal economic activities of ordinary people with a possibility of shaping positive image towards China. A large number of participating countries such as those in Africa are no threats and not sources of Chinese public nationalist reactions but BRI helps to strengthen trade and cooperation links necessary for China to get the needed resources for development, needed to ensure regime stability.

To what extent does public reaction affect the Beijing? Two recent examples in 2019 show the extent to which Beijing takes issues regarding Chinese nationalist emotions and domestic discontent into consideration. In December 2019, China Central Television refused to telecast an English Premiership game between Arsenal and Manchester City and subsequent Arsenal games when public anger expressed through the social media erupted over a player's opinion on Uighurs plight in China. China reacted in similar manner in October 2019 against America's National Basketball Association (NBA) when an individual associated with the association expressed his opinion on the ongoing Hong Kong protest.⁸⁶

Given that the current regime has invariably perfected state control, how insecure is Beijing today to warrant a solving? Under President Xi, Chinese domestic politics has experienced strongman control by the Communist Party and enhanced central government powers, evidenced in for example, the constitutional amendment that provides the president powers for an unlimited tenure of office. With his anti-corruption campaign and the amendments, President Xi is believed to control unprecedented power and personal elevation of fearsomeness that may serve as a limitation to this argument of regime insecurity. Apart from the enhanced control of the central government under President Xi, an argument could be made for the effect of technological advancement to control dissidents at hotspots like

⁸⁵ Chien-Peng Chung and Thomas Voon, "China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 3 (2017): 423-29.

⁸⁶ Laura Zhou, "Arsenal star Mesut Ozil faces backlash in China after attacking human rights abuses in Xinjiang," *South China Morning Post* (2019), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3042111/arsenal-star-mesut-ozil-faces-backlash-china-after-attacking>.



Tibet and Xinjiang, casting further doubts on how insecure the regime is today. The author is not oblivious to these factors. However, this paper asserted that Beijing is not oblivious to the fact that, these mechanisms of control are not enough and not permanent solutions to control eruption of public anger over prolonged horizontal inequalities and nationalist counter-reactions against the reactions of rival countries, and that, a permanent solution with the BRI is imperative.

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