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GLOBALIZATION CHINESE-STYLE

Shanthi Kalathil

China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. By Nadège Rolland. National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017. 195 pp.

During the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, one leader made an impassioned plea for globalization, admonishing the audience to “rise to the challenge,” for “history is made by the brave.” Champions of globalization are common at Davos, but this leader was not one of the usual suspects. Instead, it was Xi Jinping, president of the world’s largest autocracy, the People’s Republic of China. Yet as China specialist Nadège Rolland says in her new book, this should come as no surprise. In fact, she notes, globalization and its underpinnings are at the heart of Xi’s vision for a reshaped global order, of which China is to be the center.

Rolland outlines the drivers and possible implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi’s plan to link Asia, Europe, and Africa through a vast network of infrastructure projects in an ambitious twenty-first-century reimagining of the ancient Silk Road. Despite the fanfare surrounding BRI’s May 2017 coming-out party in Beijing at the Belt and Road Forum, BRI’s geopolitical implications have been relatively underappreciated within international-security circles: More analysts prefer to study China’s maritime (as opposed to continental) ambitions. Moreover, many Western commentators—surveying vague official statements and clunky, outward-directed propaganda—have dismissed the initiative as impossible to realize.

Yet to see BRI as merely a wish list of construction projects or China's latest plan for Eurasian connectivity is to miss the forest for the trees, Rolland suggests. In fact, the plan represents a direct strike at the rules-based system championed by democracies and, ultimately, at the liberal international order. Rolland discerns China's interpretation of infrastructure (both concrete and digital) as the "physical manifestation of globalization" (p. 39). In doing so, she connects Beijing's current regional and global aspirations to a history of analogous post-Cold War, largely Western-led initiatives of similar scale and scope.

Like BRI, those earlier projects sought to stimulate economic development and sociopolitical change by linking goods and people. They aimed to tie together the Eurasian landmass—Earth's most populous region—into a densely interdependent and integrated network. Unlike BRI, however, these initiatives also implicitly endorsed political liberalization and participation in the rules-based order, an emphasis deliberately excised from Beijing's vision. Indeed, Rolland notes, many countries—particularly those with an authoritarian bent—may have been reluctant to embrace the subtext of openness that lay beneath infrastructure projects led by Western countries and international financial institutions (IFIs). Given today's stronger illiberal current and China's established rhetoric of political noninterference, BRI's implicit tagline of "connectivity without political openness" may prove relatively appealing.

The Belt and Road Initiative projects a core diplomatic message, Rolland argues. It is that connection, interaction, and cooperation with China can lead to development in areas where Western countries and IFIs have failed to deliver. If Beijing's vision comes to fruition, Rolland contends, the upshot may be the replacement of the liberal international order by a vast, illiberal, China-centric network of states entwined economically, socially, and politically under Beijing's strategic sway.

Rolland puts BRI into historical context, examining its regional precursors and evolution. She proceeds by methodically analyzing the initiative's drivers, components, and domestic and international objectives. To study how Chinese policy makers and scholars conceive of this project, Rolland bypasses China's English-language public-relations efforts. She draws instead from official Chinese-language sources that speak for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership; influential Chinese journals; and interviews with CCP officials and Chinese analysts familiar with the (largely unaired) discussions of BRI within China's ruling circles.

Her inquiry reveals an intentionally flexible and shifting arrangement driven by internal economic and external strategic considerations. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Beijing perceived the Obama administration's "rebalancing" in favor of the Asia-Pacific and its push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement as components of a strategy to expand the U.S. presence in Asia while isolating

China. This moved Chinese policy analysts to consider new ways to achieve China's rise in the context of mounting challenges. The BRI was thus conceived, at least in part, as a way to broaden China's strategic hinterland while stabilizing its periphery. A network of overland pipelines would help to secure China's access to energy imports and offset its strategic vulnerability at the narrow Strait of Malacca, through which flows the bulk of China's maritime oil imports. Finally, BRI would leverage China's economic cooperation with its neighbors to counter U.S. influence.

At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative was also understood as a way to boost the Chinese economy by absorbing excess industrial capacity, developing China's inland provinces, expanding markets for Chinese exports, and establishing new channels for energy imports. Consistent with Xi's preferences, selected state-owned enterprises (SOEs) would serve as China's leading edge in host countries, establishing an economic presence and exerting political leverage. If at times profit had to be sacrificed for political ends, so be it. In Beijing's calculation, return on investment could be measured in degrees of influence as well as in purely economic terms.

However compelling the logic that underlies BRI as a concept, skeptics may have a point when they ask what the initiative currently amounts to save a host of existing infrastructure projects, signed agreements, and ambitious plans. In fact, several challenges to BRI's full realization are apparent. First, as Rolland acknowledges, any initiative conceived and personally driven by an authoritarian leader in an environment that brooks little dissent is not likely to be subject to meaningful vetting and modification. Drawing from interviews with high-level Chinese analysts, Rolland suggests that they may be more willing to make their views about BRI known in private. Still, autocrats are not widely known for encouraging critical examination of their ideas (whether in public or private), and those ideas generally suffer for it.

Moreover, one need look no further than Rolland's first chapter to find an exhaustive list of endeavors that the West and IFIs have undertaken in the BRI vein, many of which stalled due to political difficulties in host countries. The World Bank and other established institutions have learned the hard way over decades how local complications can stymie infrastructure-funding goals. If there is a magical solution to the thorny issue of local "political will," it has not yet presented itself.

The record of China's high-profile, cash-heavy approach to development has so far been decidedly mixed. In several countries where large infrastructure projects are underway, Beijing has alienated civil society. Without a genuine—and unlikely—emphasis on good governance and accountability, it is hard to see how this at-times dour reception will change. Moreover, Rolland notes that Chinese analysts take it as a foregone conclusion that India, Japan, Russia, and the United States will

object to BRI's broad strategic implications, while conflicts between smaller neighboring countries may also get in the way of smooth regional cooperation on trans-border projects. None of these challenges will be easily overcome.

Beijing proposes to address these difficult issues, Rolland says, by using strategic communication, trust-building measures, and evaluations of a host country's wishes to foster a climate of goodwill before launching a BRI project. This approach is hardly revolutionary—"local consultation" and "ownership" have long been mainstays of international-development discourse. Rolland does not fully examine China's likelihood of succeeding here, especially given that the government has not proven itself particularly adept at this in the past. While Rolland is correct to ignore the great volume of outward-directed BRI propaganda in favor of expert Chinese sources, this propaganda does contain some analytical clues. After all, if strategic communication is one of Beijing's preferred tactics, it would be worthwhile to gauge the current effectiveness of such efforts. A cursory review of externally directed BRI strategic communication suggests that Beijing's official efforts, at least, are unlikely by themselves to win over any country that has basic strategic interests at stake.

More broadly, however, Rolland points out that Beijing has given considerable thought to how it can sell to the world at large its overarching vision of a network of states lying along a new Chinese axis. China's concepts of a "community of common destiny" and a "Silk Road spirit"—far from hollow propaganda—are meant to evoke such values as openness, tolerance, and inclusivity, and to convey specific characteristics such as the notion of an adaptive network from which countries of any size can derive benefit. Notably, this language is more traditionally associated with democracies. It is not an accident that authoritarians are now using the terminology, institutions, and networks of globalization to their own ends.

These phrases serve as placeholders for a new global order, one that sits comfortably atop China's longstanding, essential economic bargain: namely, benefits for countries that support China's interests (and that are careful to not challenge Beijing on sensitive issues), and penalties for those that do the opposite. Beijing's vision for BRI ultimately depends on China's ability to keep enforcing this bargain on its own terms. It is therefore telling that increasingly few countries with significant economic ties to China have chosen to opt out of this bargain by speaking out on the Chinese government's human-rights abuses or other sensitive matters.

This is why the persistent question of whether China seeks to secure its specific interests abroad or to expand the reach of its authoritarian ideology misses the point. Beijing's interests and its ideology converge. The CCP leadership believes that achieving China's long-term interests

requires a predictable international environment that favors the stability and continuity of one-party rule. It also knows that democracies tend to be much less predictable than authoritarian countries, which sometimes offer stable leadership across decades and are able to push through projects without extensive consultation. Thus, a global authoritarian environment is one in which Beijing can most easily achieve its strategic goals, and BRI is the intended anchor of this environment for the foreseeable future.

Cynics might reasonably point to BRI's "community of common destiny" as just the latest in a series of awkward constructions that have formed the rhetorical architecture of China's emergence as a global power—Zheng Bijian's "peaceful rise" and Hu Jintao's "harmonious world" having been tried and discarded in years past. Rolland makes an effective case that BRI is something different, tied to the emergence of a new age in which democracies have to struggle to justify the established liberal international order and authoritarians in turn use the language of openness against them. Her book is essential reading for anyone who seeks to understand what the world may well look like in the future, and China's intended place within it.

Shanthi Kalathil is director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.

Advanced Democracies

The Democratic Faith: Essays on Democratic Citizenship. By Paul M. Sniderman. Yale University Press, 2017. 185 pp.

Supreme Democracy: The End of Elitism in Supreme Court Nominations. By Richard Davis. Oxford University Press, 2017. 275 pp.

Africa

Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda. By Timothy Longman. Cambridge University Press, 2017. 374 pp.

Asia

China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. By Nadège Rolland. National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017. 195 pp.