

BELT AND ROAD CITIES BEGIN TO FIND THEIR FORM

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Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, China continues to invest financial and political capital in its Belt and Road Initiative. As it seeks to fill the huge "infrastructural gap" across Eurasia, novel forms of cities and urban space are emerging both within China and beyond. This opinion identifies the link between Belt and Road cities and their spatial forms and China's ambitions to reshape its international environment. In this context, two distinctive spatial and urban forms are emerging along the BRI: Urban Corridors and Smart Surveillance Cities.

630

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The scope of the Belt and Road's ambition will produce key features of the international politics of the twenty-first century. As the Chinese state continues to invest financial and political capital in its Belt and Road Initiative, novel forms of cities and urban space are emerging within China and beyond.

Since 2013, the Chinese government has embarked upon a vast project of infrastructure construction designed to reference the ancient silk roads and to knot together a twenty first century Eurasian common market. The *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, as this open-ended project is known, is the material component of President Xi's 'China Dream' – a dream of a future order in which China occupies a central position in an international 'community of shared destiny'.

A hugely ambitious project, with a maturation date of 2049, the BRI incorporates around 70 partner states, two thirds of the world's population, has a projected US\$1.5 trillion price-tag, and incorporates six land and maritime economic corridors. Drawing on the experiences of its rapid domestic urbanization and infrastructure expansion, China is building the material foundations for an alternative vision of world order, including new institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, that is a multilateral creditor institution supported by the UK, Germany and Japan, among many other countries. Given China's undisputed leadership in infrastructure building worldwide and its ambition to push industrialization, trade, and urbanization in the Global South, a successful realization of the BRI could mean that the material underpinning of the international system of the mid-twenty first century may look very different

from that which opened the century. Might we be seeing the emergence of globalization with Chinese characteristics, as some Chinese scholars are promoting?

This is such an important project to China, in which it has invested such a large amount of political capital, that it would be premature to expect the coronavirus to slowdown BRI developments significantly, despite critique of China's early handling of and project specific setbacks. The pandemic may actually reinforce the BRI's health angle, where China offers crucial materials and expertise for urban response measures. For example, China has proposed a sister-city alliance to Bangladesh, promising extensive supported to fight epidemics and other diseases, and it continues to promote subnational elements inherent to BRI.

The BRI's focus on infrastructure construction points towards the critical, yet often underappreciated, role of material technologies in how world orders are constructed, stabilized and reconstructed. In particular, it points to a feature of world order that often gets overlooked in our tendency to focus only on the state and international institutions: the central role of urbanization and cities.

Historically there has been a tight connection between urban form and world order. One example here is the 'global city' – those urban hubs that have emerged as critical components and infrastructural backbone of the globe spanning financial networks forged in the last four decades of Western-led free market globalization. Therefore we should anticipate that the urban centers emerging along the BRI will also have their own historically specific characteristics: both cities in the green field such as Gwadar or Hambantota, and older cities with diverse forms and history, which will respond to its shaping power.

Identifying the special characteristics of the Belt and Road City will give us clues to the nature and the form of world order that growing Chinese integration will project onto the international system.

Two distinct spatial and urban forms are already becoming visible: urbanizing corridors as subnational and (often) transborder development models on the one hand, and the smart surveillance city on the other. Arguably, both are neither purely Chinese inventions nor of uniquely Chinese character. But Chinese investors, planners, engineers and politicians are crucial global forces to realize these new infrastructural manifestations of order.

BRI projects emerge through the interaction of state and capital exerting and extending power, reconfiguring the spatial arrangements within both states and cities. The result constitutes a new spatial vision, differing from both China's imperial 'concentric circles of civilization' and the post-1978 reform period's 'greater China' model which fostered investment flows between the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. The reconfiguration of space inherent to the BRI is different from forms of 'territorial expropriation' or 'territorial expansion' that we associate with past periods of imperialism or conquest. The BRI reflects a novel and emerging geopolitical condition in that 'boundary-transgressing processes and tendencies are undermining the state-centric assumptions of conventional geopolitics', while Chinese cities such as Ningbo, Xian, Chongqing and Zhengzhou become themselves diplomatic actors under the banner of the BRI.

In that context, urbanization follows the territorial pattern of the corridor. Drawing on Philip E. Steinberg's work on maritime space, 'corridorization' can be seen as an emerging spatial paradigm instrumental to the territorializing dynamics that underpin the BRI. The corridor has not only a regional/transnational scale, but produces also a much more concrete form of subnational territory. Urban corridors create new frontiers, boundaries and enclosures (social, economic, and jurisdictional). Along the Suez Canal, an area of historically transnational governance regimes, the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone that harbors almost sixty international firms, from automobile to garments and textiles, will be organically linked to the new Egyptian capital currently under construction with the help of Chinese investments and planning expertise.

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Most of the time, however, these corridors are planned to forge completely new linkages: a suite of nodal connectivity tying together urban hubs, special economic zoning projects and data transmission infrastructures, whilst integrating the rural "hinterland" into global production chains and trade networks. A prime example for this process is the emerging network of corridors across Eastern African countries, including Kenya, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somaliland, that is progressively linking multiple manufacturing zones, oil pipelines, new deep sea ports, and railway connections, despite unresolved ethnic conflicts, social tensions, and terrorism, into a new booming super-region of 120 million people. In Ethiopia, China's platform giant Alibaba invests in e-commerce and even artificial intelligence R&D.

During that process, places become repositioned in newly emerging core-periphery relationships. The resulting reconfiguration of state spatiality through multi-layer, multi-scalar arrangements belies the easy division of 'domestic' and 'international' along traditional national boundaries. As many countries, such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Cambodia, and Kazakhstan, experience similar reconfiguration, or de-peripherizing, in the context of the BRI, China's New Silk Road initiative has major implications for the re-imagining and re-making of cities and urban agglomerations within a global space that integrates ever more frontiers and places.

The other BRI specific urban form develops around the design and planning of smart surveillance cities. Clusters of technologies, including digital traffic guidance systems, autonomous driving and face recognition CCTV, are assembled into supposedly more efficient and safe living environments. Chinese cities at home, including Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Shanghai became leading in the use of network CCTV systems and fully digitalized management of neighborhoods (xiaoqu). The vision of such bureaucracy driven digitized urbanism is part and parcel of the "digital Silk Road" that aims at exporting hardware and software from Chinese companies for the rise of smart urbanization along the BRI. Leading Chinese tech companies such as Huawei, ZTE and Sensetime provide both

smart equipment and data management services. Billions are invested in projects such as the “Bonifacio Global City”, Manila, the “Smart city” of Astana or the “Safe City” project in Lusaka, while China’s e-commerce giant Alibaba expands its smart-phone app based platforms as well as data centers and innovation hubs from Southeast Asian to East Africa in a bid to capture these emerging online markets.

As these emerging BRI cities and corridorial spaces continue to find their form, shaped by a variety of evolving material and ideational components, they will crystalize new configurations of political and economic life that will shape the fate of many millions of people across Eurasia and beyond. These urban spaces do not just represent emerging consumer markets with enormous potential, but they embody, as in the past, a symbiotic relationship between a specific historical form of the city and the wider international order.