

November 2024

OCCASIONAL
PAPER

Volume 4, Number 11

Call it by its Name: Communist Chinese Imperialism

Christopher A. Ford



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

**Call it by its Name:
Communist Chinese Imperialism**

Christopher A. Ford

National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Copyright © 2024 by National Institute Press®

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by an electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The views expressed in this *Occasional Paper* are those of the author alone and do not represent any institution with which he is or has been affiliated. This paper is an adaptation of a lecture by the author for students at Missouri State University.

National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
What Do We Mean by Imperialism?	7
European Imperialist Illustrations.....	15
The Case of China	39
Conclusion	87
About the Author	99

Executive Summary

As the countries of the world struggle with what to do about the growing power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its increasingly obvious predilection to bully and intimidate other states, it is important to be honest and clear about the nature of this challenge: the problem presented by China's growing aggressiveness is not about the United States per se, but rather about the future sovereignty and autonomy of all the states of the Indo-Pacific, and perhaps beyond. It is about whether they will be pulled into a new network of quasi-tributary relationships with Beijing in which they will be expected to defer to China on any matter that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in Beijing deem to be of importance.

This paper draws out the many loose parallels that exist between the PRC's present-day entanglement of other peoples in webs of Sinocentric influence and coercion and the "classic" imperialism engaged in by the European powers in the 19th and into the early 20th Centuries. It describes at ten basic elements often associated with the metropole/periphery relationships of European imperialism in the 19th Century, and that – albeit so far with the exception of the phenomenon of direct imperial rule and settler colonialism – arguably represent a basic imperialist template. It then demonstrates the remarkable degree to which modern Chinese relationships with the Global South follow that imperialist template today. These ten facets of imperialism are:

(1) Leveraging "Earlier Mover" Advantage. The metropolitan power takes advantage of its "first mover" (or at least "earlier mover") position in an industrial-technological revolution to leverage its higher level of economic development, wealth, and technological sophistication into political power over – and economic exploitation of – more peripheral regions of the

international system. In European history, the most dramatic such advantages accrued as a result of the First Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, and globe-spanning imperial domains were the 19th Century result. Chinese leaders already enjoy the relative power of *earlier* mover advantage over much of the developing world, and openly seek *first-mover* advantage for themselves over *all* the rest of humanity from what Xi Jinping has described as a pending “Fourth Industrial Revolution.” They aim to “seize the commanding heights” of technological innovation, and anticipate that enormous world-historical changes will flow from China’s success in this regard.

(2) Using Infrastructure Development to Create Hub-and-Spoke Relationships. The metropole uses infrastructure construction programs to integrate peripheral regions of the international system into the metropolitan economy in hub-and-spoke relationships. This has the effect of making the periphery highly dependent upon the metropolitan economy and more vulnerable to political and economic exploitation. In European history, this was accomplished through projects such as the construction of railway networks, canals, telegraph lines, and steam-powered shipping lines.

The modern Chinese analogue can be seen in the breadth and extent of the infrastructure projects undertaken worldwide under the aegis of the PRC’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which is the key to what Xi Jinping describes as structural “connectivity” between China and the rest of the world. In his vision, China will build a global infrastructure network around itself that will connect physical structures, rules and regulations, and “the hearts and minds of people” everywhere. By design, this architecture is fundamentally bilateral and asymmetric, doing more to link BRI partners to China than to help them build any kind of independent connectivity among

themselves, and it thus also inescapably leads to ever-deepening relationships of dependency upon the PRC, creating webs of leverage of which China can thereafter take advantage.

(3) Infrastructure Dependency on Expatriate Metropolitan Personnel. The metropole's infrastructure programs in the periphery are also dependent upon expatriate technicians, managers, and other specialists from the metropole, who sojourn abroad in that periphery only long enough to complete such projects and thereafter return home, thus limiting the transfer of productive know-how to peripheral regions. This was certainly true of European imperial projects in the 19th Century—including the abovementioned infrastructure developments—but today China also sends veritable armies of technicians, engineers, and other specialists to implement BRI projects abroad, who tend to live apart from local people in all-Chinese communities. In some cases, BRI partners' relationships with expatriate experts from the foreign metropole have reached levels of dependency and entanglement that would hardly seem out of place in late-19th Century Egypt or Tunisia.

(4) Loans, Debt Burdens, and Leverage. Metropolitan governments or banking institutions lend money to finance these infrastructure programs, creating often-unsustainable debt burdens in peripheral regions that are thereafter leveraged into political influence, dependency, demands for political concessions, and/or cession of territorial control to metropolitan stakeholders. The history of 19th Century European imperialism provides multiple illustrations of how loans given to rulers in less developed peripheral regions often produced unsustainable debt burdens, which were in turn made the basis for various sorts of European intervention undertaken to protect those investments when default loomed.

Today, Chinese approaches to resource extraction in regions such as Africa are the result of a CCP policies of using overseas engagement to soak up excess capacity in the China's domestic economy, just as critics accused 19th Century Europeans of doing. This effort has not been a huge success, with many BRI projects now clearly struggling and some recipient states in the Global South coming to see these ties as toxic and debilitating, but there is little question that these investments have had the practical effect of entangling a great many developing countries in financial relationships with China that are as bilateral and asymmetrical as they are opaque. They have also led to notorious cases of neo-imperial Chinese self-aggrandizement, such as a 99-year leases, resource-extraction concessions, military basing rights, and even ceding territorial control in some areas. Chinese officials have also leveraged debt and trading relationships to pressure developing countries into more openly political concessions, such as votes at international organizations and on human rights issues.

(5) Resource Extraction for Metropolitan Industry. The metropole places a high priority on resource extraction from the periphery for the benefit of metropolitan industry. In the era of European imperialism, metropolitan power set up networks in the global economic periphery for extracting resources (e.g., oil or minerals) or procuring primary goods such as agricultural commodities for the benefit of metropolitan economies. Today, China places huge importance upon such resource extraction from more peripheral regions of the world, purchasing oil from the Middle East, mining critical minerals in Central Africa, and purchasing agricultural commodities from many countries. In more recent years, China has also demanded transfers of such resources as a part of debt service obligations by the recipients of BRI loans.

(6) Create and Manage Peripheral Markets. The metropole seeks to create trading markets in peripheral regions on terms favorable to the metropolitan economy, while adopting protectionist or mercantilist approaches to peripheral trade with other metropolises (or with their respective peripheries). Despite a pronounced but gradually fading British-led enthusiasm for free trade and concerted efforts to force peripheral regions to open up their own trade relationships to metropolitan penetration, imperialists came increasingly to follow this pattern in the second half of the 19th Century, with most European powers more keen on enlarging trade with their ‘own’ peripheral regions than on more generalized and nondiscriminatory expansion. The result did expand global trade, but it also intensified metropole/peripheral asymmetries.

Today, Chinese trading relationships with the Global South are profoundly asymmetrical, amounting to networks of bilateral dependency upon China. The CCP makes no bones about this, having for years proclaimed its intention to create a so-called “dual circulation” system, under which Beijing hopes to minimize China’s dependence upon foreign trade by expanding domestic demand, while still maximizing the dependence of the rest of the world upon Chinese manufactures.

(7) Creating a Co-Opted Compradore Class. Peripheral elites are to some extent enriched by engagement with metropolitan economic partners—and partly acculturated into networks of metropolitan “soft power” influence through training and educational programs—but are also corrupted and co-opted into a dependent compradore class, the members of which function as intermediaries for and de facto agents of metropolitan power and influence. In the 19th Century, extensive involvement by metropolitan powers in the economic affairs of the periphery led to the development of a class of local compradores who functioned as intermediaries for European economic

interests in local affairs and became new elites in peripheral society within the hub-and-spoke metropole/periphery system.

Today, though little information seems to be available about China's economic effect upon peripheral societies—as opposed merely to their economies—it is clear that Beijing's approach to international economic policy is having a deleterious impact upon local corruption and governance in the Global South. Corruption is easy and apparently commonplace in BRI projects, with leaders in countries finding Chinese aid a profitably “strings free” means of injecting money into the local system without transparency or accountability. Chinese economic penetration of peripheral economies and corruption of local elites, moreover, also likely help ensure that Beijing can call upon such elites to do its bidding if CCP officials desire.

(8) Feelings of Civilizational Superiority. The metropole perceives itself to possess a civilization qualitatively superior to that of the peripheral regions, and it indulges feelings of racial and cultural contempt for that periphery. The metropole also tends to assume that the periphery's contact with—and implied subordination to—the dominant metropolitan culture will help “civilize” the benighted residents there, making them think and act more like members of the dominant culture. The European powers of imperialism's 19th Century heyday, of course, indulged infamously strong feelings of superiority and virulent racist condescension against more peripheral regions and peoples.

Today, Chinese leaders—including, and perhaps especially, Xi Jinping himself—have increasingly emphasized the claim that there is something special, superior, and even transcendent about traditional Chinese culture that gives Beijing a special role to play in shaping and guiding the future of humanity. Modern CCP thinking about building a Chinese-led “harmonious world” or a

“community with a shared future for mankind” represents a sharply hierarchic, fundamentally authoritarian, and profoundly Sinocentric theory, ultimately aspiring to scale some loose analogue of China’s own supposedly “harmonious” domestic order onto a broader world stage.

The modern PRC worldview is also remarkably racist. Encouraged by government-sponsored pseudo-scholarship making claims such as that Chinese culture has remained pure and unchanged for “5,000 years” and that ethnic Chinese are the only one of the world’s peoples not to have suffered the indignity of originating in Africa (which is presumed to be an ignoble thing). China’s racializing myths revolve around the world-historical specialness and inherent virtue of the Chinese people, and have for centuries compared Chinese favorably to the crude and merely semi-human barbarians of other, inherently inferior, civilizations.

(9) Claims of Proprietary Interests in Metropole’s “Own” People Everywhere. Metropolitan political leaders feel themselves to have a strong proprietary interest in the fate of their “own” sort of people wherever they may be—with this collective selfhood defined not in strictly territorial-citizenship terms but rather on the basis of religious, racial, or other such identity—and insist upon some form of protective rights or extraterritorial jurisdiction over those persons in peripheral regions. European powers were for many decades quite willing to assert jurisdiction over what were felt to be their “own” people, even when such persons were not within the reach of their domestic territorial jurisdiction. This was especially the case in the relationships between the major European states and the declining realms of the Ottoman Empire and Qing Dynasty China, where special legal enclaves (e.g., the Chinese “treaty ports”) were established and metropolitan powers claimed extraterritorial privileges in regulating the affairs of Europeans there.

Today, officials in Beijing have a remarkably strong sense of proprietary interest when it comes to the affairs of persons of ethnic Chinese descent living abroad, even when these people are citizens of foreign countries, and whether or not they have any actual connection to China at all. Chinese officials regard the entire global ethnic Chinese diaspora as essentially “belonging” to the CCP Party-State: “Beijing defines membership of the Chinese nation not in legal terms, but primarily in ethnic and racial terms; accordingly, all overseas Chinese are considered part of the People’s Republic of China – no matter what passport they hold or how many generations their families have lived abroad.”

This race-essentialist attitude already manifests itself in efforts to propagandize and to police the ethnic Chinese diaspora worldwide – whom Xi Jinping calls “the great unity of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation at home and abroad.” CCP policies focus upon them for intelligence recruitment and influence operations, and seek to intimidate, coerce, or even kidnap diaspora members abroad who displease CCP authorities or otherwise who fail to “represent Chinese interests in influential political positions abroad.” As “unofficial ambassadors,” ethnic Chinese everywhere are “expected to spread China’s narratives ..., defend China’s ‘core interests’, and help with the transfer of knowledge and technology to China.”

(10) Gunboat Diplomacy. In order to protect the investment, trading, or other interests it has accumulated in peripheral regions, the metropole is not above occasionally using heavy-handed coercive tactics – including military force and episodic intervention (i.e., “gunboat diplomacy”) – when aspects of this relationship are felt to be threatened. Empowered by the “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) associated with the First Industrial Revolution, the European powers became increasingly willing to act aggressively to safeguard “their” port

installations, mines, factories, and real estate around the world, making such interventions increasingly common.

Today, China does not yet have the predominant military power vis-à-vis distant portions of the earth that 19th Century Europeans enjoyed, but it does have an increasingly powerful military and is building up its expeditionary power-projection forces, including a growing fleet of aircraft carriers. Chinese officials have already begun to speak more openly about the possibility that Beijing will need to ensure access to overseas ports for peacekeeping and disaster-relief operations, and PLA vessels have already sporadically undertaken port visits to countries heavily indebted to China.

These ten parallels between Communist China's engagement with the Global South and the approaches taken by 19th Century European imperialists are striking – and should be disturbing indeed for leaders in the Global South. We may see here, in fact, a mimetic imperialism, in which China seeks to establish relationships vis-à-vis the rest of the world analogous to those built generations ago (via-a-vis China, among others) by the Europeans. Such mimesis not only brings China power and profit, but it may also be critical to China's own narrative of "rejuvenated" national identity. China seems to feel it cannot claim to have fully triumphed over its own past "humiliation" without achieving an imperialist domination of its own – that is, by being able to lord it over others in the way others lorded it over China in the 19th Century.

Which brings to mind yet another grim parallel: the role of narcotrafficking in the grand narrative of China's "Century of Humiliation." Over the years, Chinese government propagandists have transformed the Opium War of 1839-42 – in which Britain forced the Qing Dynasty to accept opium exports from India – "into its current incarnation as the bedrock of Chinese nationalism." In this light, it is difficult not to see another awful parallelism in

China's export of vast quantities of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals that have produced an enormous and lethal public health crisis in the United States. This trade is not merely tolerated, but may actually be being weaponized by CCP officials who have long fetishized the humiliation of the Opium War and dreamed of turning the tables on the malevolent foreign forces they blame for it.

Whether or not China's attempt at a new, Sinocentric imperium will run into problems from the anti-imperialist upwelling that 19th Century European power ultimately elicited among the peoples of the global periphery as the Global South seeks to preserve the sovereignty and autonomy it won from Europe—and what specific form such problems would take—is beyond the scope of this paper. For those in the rest of the world concerned about the implications of Chinese power, however, the Chinese Communist Party's "neo-neo-imperialism" must be understood as one of the major trends of the modern era.

Introduction

The various countries of the world, and especially those of the Indo-Pacific region, are struggling with what to do about the growing power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its increasingly obvious predilection to bully and intimidate its neighbors. Because of the central importance China places upon pushing the United States out of the region and undermining the U.S. alliance and partnership relationships that have helped keep regional countries secure against Soviet, Russian, and Chinese threats for many decades, many observers—and U.S. officials¹—simply tend to characterize the modern world's "China problem" as one of strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.

Such an interpretation is not wrong, and it draws upon clear and well-established precedents. As early as 1903, for instance, the seminal Chinese nationalist writer Liang Qichao lamented—after a visit to the United States where he seems to have been particularly distressed by President Theodore Roosevelt's plans for a major U.S. Navy fleet—that the growth of American power would preclude China from its destiny of global hegemony. According to Liang, it was intolerable that

no country is in a better position to utilize the Pacific in order to hold sway over the world than China. But China is unable to become the master

¹ See, for example, *U.S. National Security Strategy*, October 2022, from the introductory letter by President Biden ("We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

of the Pacific, and politely yields this position to others.²

Many years later, similar thinking was clearly apparent in the comment of then-PRC Foreign Minister (and later Vice Premier) Qian Qichen before a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in 1995 that China “do[es] not recognize the United States as a power which claims to maintain the peace and stability of Asia.”³ And more recently still, China’s extraordinary military buildup and construction of a blue-water power-projection navy would seem to underline the point.

Nevertheless, the “it’s about strategic competition” narrative still misses a great deal, inasmuch as there is *far* more at stake in these matters than simply whether Beijing succeeds in expelling U.S. influence from the Western Pacific. In particular, one vital aspect of the challenge does not go directly to the issue of the relative strength of the United States or China at all, but rather to the likely *impact* of China’s possible future success in undermining the American influence that has helped so many countries preserve their *independence* vis-à-vis China. Specifically, the more important geopolitical question is not about the United States *per se* but rather about the sovereignty and autonomy of *all* the states of the Indo-Pacific, and perhaps beyond. It is about whether they will be pulled into a new network of quasi-tributary relationships with Beijing—not unlike those China enjoyed with some of its neighbors for

² Christopher A. Ford, *China Looks at the West: Identity, Global Ambitions, and the Future of Sino-American Relations*, University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 106 (quoting Liang’s comments as recounted in R. David Arkush & Leo O. Lee, *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present*, University of California Press, 1989, p. 83).

³ Jim Mann, “‘Go Home America’: Chinese Turnabout on U.S. Military Role in Asia,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 13, 1995, p. B-4.

many hundreds of years – in which they will be expected to defer to China on any matter that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in Beijing deem to be of importance.⁴

As this author has pointed out in discussions with regional officials,⁵ it follows from the coercive ambition of the PRC's regional strategy that there is thus (or at least should be) a critical *anti-imperialist* aspect to today's struggles over how to respond to China's power. This is something that the United States' military allies in the region already understand, but the point should be drawn far more broadly as well. Invoking the longstanding ethic of "non-alignment" that has historically been of great importance to leaders in countries such as Indonesia, for instance, I have argued that non-alignment's "ethic of independence and autonomy against hegemonism makes improved U.S. ... cooperation" with Indo-Pacific states on key shared security issues "not merely possible but also necessary." The key issues for this cooperation

revolve around efforts to do precisely what it is that nonalignment – as an ethical posture – hopes

⁴ See generally, for example, Christopher A. Ford, "China's Strategic Vision: Part Three – Envisioning a Sinocentric World" MITRE Center for Strategic Competition *Occasional Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 3, June 27, 2022, available at <https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/China%27s%20Strategic%20Vision%20%28MITRE%29%20Part%20III.pdf>; Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, & Asha Clark, "China's Quest for Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States" RAND Corporation, 2021, pp. 56, 99, & 105, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR447-1/RAND_RRA447-1.pdf.

⁵ Christopher A. Ford, "'Non-Alignment,' U.S.-Indonesian Security Cooperation, and Partnership to Protect Sovereign Autonomy from Chinese Coercion," remarks at the U.S.-Indonesia Security Dialogue, Bali, Indonesia, August 10, 2022, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/nonalignment-u-s-indonesian-security-cooperation-and-partnership-to-protect-sovereign-autonomy-from-chinese-coercion>.

to accomplish. Specifically, they revolve around protecting the political, economic, and strategic autonomy of the sovereign peoples of the region against China's efforts to enmesh them in exploitative webs of dependency, coercion, and subjugation.

The key issues today, in other words, aren't ones of incorporation into 'my alliance' or 'his alliance,' but rather about how to cooperate better as friends and partners to preserve the sovereignty and independence of regional states against submergence in a new Sinocentric order. In this context, the ethical values of nonalignment point strongly in favor of deeper cooperation between our governments, rather than against it.⁶

This paper therefore seeks to contribute to policy discourse in the Indo-Pacific by highlighting the degree to which cooperation against China's global ambitions is in fact *anti-imperialist* cooperation. To this end, it will draw out the remarkable number of loose parallels that exist between the PRC's present-day entanglement of other peoples in webs of Sinocentric influence and coercion⁷ and so much of the 'classic imperialism' engaged in by the European powers in the 19th Century – including against China. This parallelism is striking, and it both can and *should* be the focus of great attention by leaders across the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See, for example, Christopher A. Ford, "Xi Jinping, Michel Foucault, and Spy Balloons? Communist China's Theory of Control and Visions of a Post-Westphalian World Order," *National Security Law Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2023, pp. 43-54, available at <https://www.nslj.org/wp-content/uploads/Ford-Xi-Jinping-Michel-Foucault-and-Spy-Balloons-Communist-Chinas-Theory-of-Control-and-Visions-of-a-Post-Westphalian-World-Order.pdf>.

Especially during and since the wave of decolonization that swept the world in the mid-20th Century, the phrase “imperialism” has acquired connotations of an almost unalloyed malevolence—to the point that some scholars have felt the need to correct the record by providing more context and nuance than such cartoonish characterizations customarily admit.⁸ Nevertheless, for generations, the overseas power of 19th Century European metropolises did nothing if it did not constrain and repress the political and economic autonomy of peoples in less-developed portions of the world in ways that cannot but traduce the values of popular sovereignty and independence so prized in the contemporary world system.

It is for this reason that understanding modern PRC behavior, and China’s ambitions in the world, as being genuinely *imperialist* ones is so important. If the peoples of the world who spent so long struggling (and often even fighting) for their sovereignty *as* national peoples are to preserve the autonomy and independence that such sovereignty should entail, it is essential recognize and act to forestall emerging threats to that autonomy as quickly as possible.

Accordingly, the following pages will compare and contrast present-day Chinese engagement with the rest of the world—and particularly vis-à-vis the developing world—with 19th Century European imperialist precedents. By highlighting these disturbing comparisons, this paper hopes to contribute to contemporary leaders’ ability to harness the political and moral energy of the anti-imperialist movement in ways that will help preserve

⁸ Ambitiously, for instance, one of the present author’s Pharos Foundation colleagues, Oxford professor Nigel Biggar, recently devoted an entire book to providing “a more historically accurate, fairer, more positive story ... about the British Empire than the anti-colonialists want us to hear.” Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism*, William Collins, 2023, p. 7.

national autonomy against Beijing's accretion of coercive power.

What Do We Mean by Imperialism?

This paper does not attempt – and would not presume – to supply a comprehensive theory of imperialism, either in purporting to describe its many facets or in outlining a mechanism that explains its arrival and evolution. What it will do, however, is offer an account of a number of elements that are often associated with imperialism, and that describe aspects of the relationship between European powers and those people who fell increasingly under European domination and control during the course of the 19th Century. As will be seen, these “metropole versus periphery” relationships have some remarkable parallels in Beijing’s relations with the developing world today, making clear that the term “imperialist” is an appropriate way to describe mid-21st Century PRC foreign policy as well.

To this end, I offer the following ten basic elements, which are often associated with the metropole/peripheral relationships of European imperialism in the 19th Century.

1. The metropolitan power takes advantage of its “first mover” (or at least “earlier mover”) position in an industrial-technological revolution to leverage its higher level of economic development, wealth, and technological sophistication into political power over – and economic exploitation of – more peripheral regions of the international system.
2. The metropole uses infrastructure construction programs to integrate peripheral regions of the international system into the metropolitan economy in hub-and-spoke relationships. This is depicted in the metropole as bringing development to the periphery, but also has the effect of making that periphery highly dependent upon the metropolitan economy and

more vulnerable to political and economic exploitation.

3. The metropole's infrastructure programs in the periphery are also dependent upon expatriate technicians, managers, and other specialists from the metropole, who sojourn abroad in that periphery only long enough to complete such projects and thereafter return home, thus limiting the transfer of productive know-how to peripheral regions.
4. Metropolitan governments or banking institutions lend money to finance these infrastructure programs, creating often-unsustainable debt burdens in peripheral regions that are thereafter leveraged into political influence, dependency, demands for political concessions, and/or cession of territorial control to metropolitan stakeholders.
5. The metropole places a high priority on resource extraction from the periphery for the benefit of metropolitan industry.
6. The metropole seeks to create trading markets in peripheral regions on terms favorable to the metropolitan economy, while adopting more protectionist or mercantilist approaches to peripheral trade with *other* metropolises (or with their respective peripheries).
7. Peripheral elites are to some extent enriched by engagement with metropolitan economic partners – and partly acculturated into networks of metropolitan “soft power” influence through training and educational programs – but are also corrupted and co-opted into a dependent *compradore* class, the members of which function

as intermediaries for and de facto agents of metropolitan power and influence.

8. The metropole perceives itself to possess a civilization qualitatively superior to that of the peripheral regions, and it indulges feelings of racial and cultural contempt for that periphery. The metropole also tends to assume that the periphery's contact with—and implied subordination to—the dominant metropolitan culture will help “civilize” the benighted residents there, making them think and act more like members of the dominant culture (without ever actually being seen to *become* metropolitans).
9. Metropolitan political leaders feel themselves to have a strong proprietary interest in the fate of their “own” sort of people wherever they may be—with this collective selfhood defined not in strictly territorial-citizenship terms but rather on the basis of religious, racial, or other such identity—and insist upon some form of protective rights or extraterritorial jurisdiction over those persons in peripheral regions.
10. In order to protect the investment, trading, or other interests it has accumulated in peripheral regions, the metropole is not above occasionally using heavy-handed coercive tactics—including military force and episodic intervention (e.g., “gunboat diplomacy”)—when aspects of this relationship are felt to be threatened.

This list is, of course, unavoidably more illustrative than exhaustive. Nor is it my point that “imperialism” *only* exists when all ten of these factors are present, nor that even together they necessarily form a comprehensive account of the phenomenon.

The reader will also note that I have not included in this list the phenomenon of *direct* political rule from the metropole—either by governmental organs or other institutions—nor does it include settler colonialism, even though these things are certainly stereotypically associated with imperialist domination. In fairness, direct imperial rule and settler colonialism is a facet of traditional European imperialism in which China has so far engaged primarily only *internally*, by using de facto settler colonialism not only to create a “first line of defense” in the form of a “Great Wall of villages” just inside China’s borders,⁹ but also to overwhelm and help eradicate the indigenous cultures of ethnic and religious minorities within the PRC’s boundaries in Tibet and Xinjiang.¹⁰ To be sure, China has in recent years

⁹ See, for example, Mui Xiao & Agnes Chang, “China’s Great Wall of Villages,” *The New York Times* (August 10, 2024), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/10/world/asia/china-border-villages.html>.

¹⁰ See generally, for example, Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, “Han Migration to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Between State Schemes and Migrants’ Strategies,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie (ZfE) / Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology (JSCA)*, Vol. 138, No. 2, Special Issue on Mobility and Identity in Central Asia, 2013, p. 155, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24364952>; “Beijing sends a new flood of Han migrants to Lhasa: Tibetans risk disappearing,” *PIME Asia News*, January 27, 2015, available at <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Beijing-sends-a-new-flood-of-Han-migrants-to-Lhasa-Tibetans-risk-disappearing-33294.html>; Edward Wong, “China’s Money and Migrants Pour into Tibet,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2010, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/world/asia/25tibet.html>. Such internal settler colonialism is Chinese government policy, and is accompanied by considerable discrimination against indigenous populations. See, for example, U.S. Department of State, “China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet): Tibet,” Country Report on China (2021) (“The government gave many Han Chinese persons, especially retired soldiers, incentives to move to Tibet.”), available at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/tibet/>; U.S. Department of State, “China: (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet),” 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2023) (“minority groups in border and other regions had

begun to use government-sponsored settlement policies to exert creeping control over land claimed by other countries in contested border regions¹¹ and openly to occupy and militarize pseudo-islands created by massive dredging projects in areas of the South China Sea claimed by other countries¹² but those will have to remain a topic for another day.

Though it would be impossible *not* to describe phenomena of direct rule as “imperialist,” however, I have not included them here for fear that focusing upon such dramatic factors would blind us to the still potentially quite important asymmetric and coercive relationships the list details. In that sense, the above list may be seen to

less access to education than their Han Chinese counterparts, faced job discrimination in favor of Han Chinese migrants”), available at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/>.

¹¹ See, for example, Robert Barnett, “China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country’s Territory,” *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2021 (discussing Chinese village-construction on the Bhutanese side of a contested border with Bhutan), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>.

¹² See, for example, Gordon Lubold, “Pentagon Says China Has Stepped Up Land Reclamation in South China Sea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2015, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-says-china-has-stepped-up-land-reclamation-in-south-china-sea-1440120837>; “Philippines ‘concerned’ over China land reclamation in disputed sea, France 24, December 12, 2022, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221221-philippines-concerned-over-china-land-reclamation-in-disputed-sea>. Note, however, that despite commonly-used terminology describing this creation of artificial islands as “land reclamation,” this is not actually the correct term. See, for example, Carl Thayer, “No, China Is Not Reclaiming Land in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, June 7, 2025 (“Let’s be clear: China is not reclaiming land in the South China Sea in order to improve conditions on a land feature—an island—that has deteriorated due the impact of the environment or human use. China is dredging sand from the seabed and coral reefs to create artificial islands.”), available at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/no-china-is-not-reclaiming-land-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

correspond more closely with what has sometimes been called “neo-imperialism”¹³ than it does with the “high imperialism” seen when metropolitan European powers directly *ruled* distant colonies overseas or Russia’s tsars extended their dynastic control across central Asia by direct conquest.¹⁴

Nevertheless, I contend that this list of ten factors does suggest an intelligibly “imperialist” dynamic of notably asymmetric power relationships, economic dependency, and political influence that is very much worth considering to the extent that contemporary developments seem to be producing a 21st Century analogue to phenomena seen in so much of the 19th. The following pages set the stage for such

¹³ See generally, for example, Jay R. Mandle, “Neo-Imperialism: An Essay in Definition,” *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 1967, p. 318 (alleging that “[t]he fundamental consideration resides in the fact that the superior economic strength of the rich nation, as represented by its international corporations, operates in the poor economy in a way which tends to cause resources to be allocated in a way inconsistent with economic growth. Raw materials will leave the country because this procedure is consistent with the internal cost structure of the corporation; potential industries will be still-born because of the absence of precisely the raw materials which are exported; and local entrepreneurs will avoid industry in general because of the over-powering competition with which they are confronted. Thus ‘neo-imperialism’ can justifiably refer to the fact that, despite the absence of political controls, the basic evolution of the local economy will still be determined by the consequences which flow from the pattern of private expatriate economic dominance.”), available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27856280>.

¹⁴ See generally, for example, Andrew Mycock & Marina Loskoutova, “Nation, State and Empire: The Historiography of ‘High Imperialism’ in the British and Russian Empires,” in *Nationalizing the Past. Writing the Nation: National Historiographies and the Making of Nation States in the 19th and 20th Century Europe*, S. Berger & C. Lorenz, eds., Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp. 233-234 (noting similarities in expansion and composition between the multi-ethnic British and Russian empires, despite their later taking very different approaches to the prospect of democratization and decolonization), available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230292505_12.

cross-temporal comparison between modern Chinese behavior and earlier European precedents by offering illustrative examples of the latter.

European Imperialist Illustrations

Leveraging “Earlier Mover” Advantage

It is far beyond the scope of this paper to explore the causes or origins of the Industrial Revolution that propelled the European metropolises—and Britain in particular—to positions of overwhelming geopolitical dominance. Nevertheless, the years of the Industrial Revolution truly represented “a revolution, a major discontinuity” – a period in which economic and technological change and growth “became the norm rather than the exception, and a massive free lunch was consumed. ... The Industrial Revolution made Britain the nineteenth century’s economic superpower, a position it retained up to 1914.”¹⁵ As this author has described it elsewhere, by the early years of the 19th Century,

steam-powered machines were beginning to revolutionize industry and productive activity in Britain and several countries in Western Europe as part of a dramatic process of change and advancement in which technology and industry evolved into a self-accelerating ecosystem of invention and innovation that reshaped virtually every existing sector of human activity. These advances—which we remember today as the Industrial Revolution—were themselves built on foundations laid during the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, which saw dramatic leaps in scientific and material knowledge with the development of the modern scientific method, the advent of Newtonian mechanics, and huge

¹⁵ François Crouzet, “Review: A New Economic History of Britain,” *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 55, No.4, December 1995, p. 909, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123823?seq=1>.

strides in the emergence of modern fields such as physics, optics, chemistry, and metallurgy.

This scientific, technological, and industrial-economic effervescence turned the world upside down, letting loose powerful forces of productivity and industrialization that produced extraordinary change that was as profound as it was disorienting. This was, after all, the era that produced both Dickensian industrial squalor and the marvels of modern know-how showcased at the 'Great Exhibition' in London's Crystal Palace in 1851. It produced the leaps of human progress represented by steamships and railways, the telegraph, antimalarial drugs, electric light, blood transfusion, undersea cables, photography, and the smallpox vaccine. But it also gave rise to the grimmer novelties of dynamite, long-range artillery, machine guns, and poison gas.

This surge of technological innovation and industrial power produced a geopolitical revolution as well, for the asymmetry of its arrival and the enormous advantages that accrued to 'first movers' in the age of modern industrial production and military firepower helped supercharge imperial expansion by those European powers that led in the Industrial Revolution. The implications were stunning.

By the 1920s, for instance, Europeans had conquered nearly 85 percent of the planet, with the British Empire alone covering a quarter of the Earth's surface. Even tiny and relatively weak Belgium had seized for itself an overseas empire

that included one colony – the Belgian Congo – about 76 times larger than Belgium itself.¹⁶

Whatever the various contributing causes there might have been to this succession of developments, its net significance was extraordinary. Simply put, the Industrial Revolution set the stage for more than a century of worldwide European imperialist self-assertion by creating unusually dramatic economic and military asymmetries between regions of the world, at a time in which evolving technology permitted such power differentials to be *exploited* in unprecedented ways, even at extreme global distances.

Using Infrastructure Development to Create Hub-and-Spoke Relationships

European imperial powers often spent a great deal of time and effort on major infrastructure projects in their colonial peripheries. Even while being clearly *also* an instrument of social control and military manpower movement (e.g., in the event of another uprising such as the one that occurred in India in 1857), for instance, extensive railway construction projects in British-ruled India were very important to the country's economic development.¹⁷ Beginning with early work to establish a rail line between Bombay and Thana that was completed in 1853, subsequent railway construction in India boomed, until by 1900 some

¹⁶ Christopher Ford & Dawn Meyerriecks, "Science and Technology Net Assessment and Competitive Strategy," MITRE Center for Strategic Competition *Occasional Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 8, December 21, 2022, pp. 1-2, available at <https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/STNA%20FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁷ See generally, for example, Christian Wolmar, "Britain's Colonial Railways Transformed India," *Reconnecting Asia*, June 13, 2017, available at <https://reconasia.csis.org/how-britians-colonial-railways-transformed-india/>.

24,000 miles of track had been built, financed entirely by British private investment capital.¹⁸

European—and Japanese—railway construction was also a major feature of infrastructure development in northern China in the late Qing period, with a significant railway system being built that amounted, in effect, to an extension into China's interior of the European-dominated treaty-port system established by the colonialist empires of Japan, Russia, and Germany. "From the time of the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1911)," it has been observed, "the Chinese railroad was developed relying on foreign investment, and controlled partly by the Russian and Japanese Empires."¹⁹ For many years, such projects were thus a critical vector for the extension of imperialist control into China—as epitomized, perhaps, by the Chinese Eastern Railway, "one of China's most strategically vital and economically prosperous transportation nodes,"²⁰ but one with a problematic past. Thanks to juridical extraterritoriality (of which we will see more below),

a stock company originally registered under Russian law—and its Russian employees, together with the large number of other Russians who came with the railway, [Chinese Eastern] carried with [its engineers and administrators] Russian jurisdiction and Russian police everywhere they

¹⁸ Laxman D. Satya, "British Imperial Railways in Nineteenth Century South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 47, November 22–28, 2008, p. 69, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278213>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Junjie Xi & Paco Mejias Villatoro, "The Phenomenology of a Railway Expedition in China: The Gate, the Station, the Journey and the Arrival," *International Journal of Sensory Environment*, May 18, 2020, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/3074>.

²⁰ Ma Te, "The Relics of the Russo-Japanese War," *Sixth Tone*, February 28, 2019, available at <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003607>.

went. Thus the whole zone traversed by this system, including the South Manchuria Railway, was alienated and virtually transformed into Russian territory.²¹

After the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, moreover, Japan took over control of the southern branch of that rail line, between Changchun and Lüshun, making it into a central piece of the imperialist edifice from which Japan would later mount a devastating war against China.²² “(Indeed, the Soviet Union continued this pattern of extraterritorial exploitation of China even after Mao Zedong and his Communists had come to power. The Soviets, for instance, established a joint mineral-extraction company in Sinkiang that enjoyed extraterritorial rights, and Joseph Stalin repeatedly urged Mao to accept directly controlled Soviet enterprises on Chinese territory.”²³ It might be quite wrong to describe all such infrastructure efforts as inherently “predatory,”²⁴ but also difficult to see them as being anything other than—in political and moral terms—at least problematic, as well as undeniably imperialist.

²¹ Chin-Chun Wang, “The Chinese Eastern Railway,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 122, November 1925, p. 57, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1016450>.

²² Ma Te, op. cit.

²³ Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Hekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of The Soviet Union From 1917 to the Present*, Phyllis B. Carlos, trans., Summit Books, 1986, p. 566.

²⁴ Though some do. See, for example, Satya, op. cit., p. 69 (“The massive predatory and exploitative nature of the imperial railway project under the facade of Britain’s benevolence to the people of India could not have been further from the reality of the material condition of the masses under colonial hegemony.”) available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278213>.

Infrastructure Dependency on Expatriate Metropolitan Personnel

The infrastructure projects undertaken by European metropolitan powers, moreover, were ones that would have been quite impossible without reliance upon European technicians, administrators, managers, and other specialists. By way of illustration, between 1840 and 1900, many of the same engineers who had carried out major water supply system engineering projects in Britain went off to build the same sorts of systems in British colonies such as Bombay, Colombo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. This service resulted in projects “of transformative influence” – “of environmental and technical change that helped to solidify the modernizing colonial state”²⁵ – and they were thus perhaps not invariably problematic from the perspective of the peripheral areas that such projects helped develop.

That said, such metropolitan technocrats did not – with the specific exception, perhaps, of settler colonial outposts (e.g., Australia or South Africa) – tend to *settle* in the peripheral areas in which these projects were undertaken. Where their service did not outlast their specific duties in establishing the infrastructure in question, the net result for the peoples of that periphery might well be one of debt, dependency, and underdevelopment, with little enduring transfer of economic or technological “know-how” from the metropole.

Indeed, in some particularly fraught contexts of decolonization, metropolitan specialists seem almost spitefully to have taken as much as possible of their expert knowledge with them when they departed. When Portugal

²⁵ John Broich, “Engineering the Empire: British Water Supply Systems and Colonial Societies, 1850–1900,” *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April 2007, p. 346, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/510891>.

finally left Angola and Mozambique in 1975, for example, its technicians were reported to have taken with them even *maps* of the local underground waterpipe network in Luanda, and to have poured concrete down the elevator shaft at a beach resort so as to ensure it would thereafter be uneconomic to operate.²⁶

Loans, Debt Burdens, and Leverage

At least since J.A. Hobson in the late years of the 19th Century, some scholars of imperialism have claimed that one of its drivers was a dynamic of oversaving and underconsumption in the advanced European metropolitan economies, which made them eager to find outlets for such investment abroad, driving the Europeans to occupy ever-greater roles in peripheral economies and polities.²⁷ One need not go so far down the road of economic determinism as Hobson, however, to see that the history of 19th Century European imperialism provides multiple illustrations of how loans given to rulers in less developed peripheral regions often produced unsustainable debt burdens, which were in turn made the basis for various sorts of European intervention undertaken to *protect* those investments when default loomed.

This was perhaps most notoriously the case in Egypt, which at the time remained under loose Ottoman suzerainty under the rule of an official known as the Khedive. Initially in connection with his obligations to the Suez Canal project – an epic infrastructure project in its own

²⁶ See, for example, Scott Kraft, "Legacy of Spite : Ex-Colonies Give Portugal the Blame," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1989, available at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-23-mn-682-story.html>.

²⁷ See generally, for example, P.J. Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism, and Finance, 1887-1938* Oxford University Press, 2002.

right – the Khedive borrowed heavily from banking houses in Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Istanbul, securing these loans against the revenue of multiple Egyptian provinces and the general revenues of the Egyptian state. When the Ottoman government *itself* defaulted on outstanding debt in 1875, Egyptian credit plummeted further, and the Khedive sold Britain a 45-percent share in the canal.²⁸

When the Khedive defaulted on these loans, a “plan of settlement” was drawn up in 1876, which “established a special administration of the railways and the port of Alexandria” under the direct control of a multilateral commission the membership of which was only one-third Egyptian. In the face of continuing financial problems, the Khedive was gradually excluded from the administration of essentially *all* Egyptian finances, with power being transferred to “an executive council whose leading members were foreigners.” When even *this* seemed not to resolve things, the Khedive was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, and when this led to rioting in Alexandria in 1882, the British launched a military invasion and essentially took over administration of the entire Egyptian government. Thereafter, the British Consul-General enjoyed overall authority, and British advisors were placed in all Egyptian ministries.²⁹

As Richard Evans has recounted, this doleful sequence of debt-fueled modernization projects, default, and an “inevitable [European dominated] Debt Commission ... to sort things out” formed “a familiar pattern” in 19th Century

²⁸ Ali Coşkun Tunçer, “Foreign Debt and Colonization in Egypt and Tunisia (1862-82),” in *Sovereign Debt Diplomacies: Rethinking sovereign debt from colonial empires to hegemony*, Pierre Penet & Juan Flores Zendejas, eds., Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 76-77, available at <https://academic.oup.com/book/39549/chapter/339404385>.

²⁹ Tunçer, op. cit., pp. 82 & 88-90.

imperialism.³⁰ Things were not, for instance, much different in Tunisia with the French, though things transpired there on somewhat smaller a scale. The administration of the Tunisian Bey who ruled under Ottoman suzerainty borrowed heavily and then defaulted, leading to the appointment in 1868 of a nine-member international financial commission (*Commission Financière Internationale*) tasked with reviewing and settling the government's liabilities. Later, France acquired a more and more dominant position in Tunisia, with the functions of that commission being transferred to a newly created Ministry of Finance under French control in 1884 after Tunisia formally became a French protectorate in 1881. "As the initial deal for guaranteeing the debt, France insisted on placing key agencies, beginning with the Ministry of Finance, under the leadership of French specialists accountable to the resident general."³¹ The Bey may have retained his formal position, but France ruled.

Resource Extraction for Metropolitan Industry

The role of European metropolitan power in setting up networks for extracting resources (e.g., oil or minerals) or procuring primary goods such as agricultural commodities—both of which were often very important to metropolitan economies³²—is well enough known to

³⁰ Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914*, Viking, 2016, p. 646.

³¹ Tunçer, op. cit., pp. 77, 80, & 87.

³² See, for example, C. Orwin, "Colonial Agricultural Production," *Nature*, No. 159, March 15, 1947, p. 350 ("The importance of the Colonies, however, in our national economy is even greater to-day than it was before the great changes in the commercial structure of the British Empire and its relations with other countries brought about by the War."), available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/159350a0>; A. Easton & A. Gwaindepi, "Colonial extractivism and development: The state and private diamond extraction at the British Cape Colony, 1870–

require little comment. In economic terms, the results of these relationships were certainly mixed from the point of view of the peripheral regions.

While they did play some role in establishing more sophisticated economic systems on the ground in ways that might not have occurred otherwise,³³ they also sometimes stressed extraction and exploitation for the benefit of the metropolitan economy to such an extent that they were “liable to becoming ‘wealth extraction enclaves’ with limited or no developmental benefits to most of the colonial inhabitants.”³⁴ As with the infrastructure development projects with which they were sometimes associated – e.g., in order to make it possible for such resources or commodities to be efficiently acquired and shipped to metropolitan markets – these extractive systems have generally been painted in a grim light by modern observers who see them as highly exploitative.³⁵

1910,” *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2021, available at

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214790X21001076>; Thomas Taylor, “The Establishment of a European Plantation Sector within the Emerging Colonial Economy of Uganda, 1902-1919,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1986, p. 35 (noting “the introduction and expansion of a lucrative cotton industry in Uganda” and “the inception of an embryonic European plantation sector within the protectorate’s colonial economy”), available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/218694>.

³³ See, for example, Melissa Dell & Benjamin A. Olken, “The Development Effects of the Extractive Colonial Economy: The Dutch Cultivation System in Java,” April 2017 (discussing mixed benefits of the “Cultivation System” established by the Dutch in Java), available at <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/dell/files/170414draft.pdf>; Wolmar, op. cit.

³⁴ Easton & Gwaindepi, op. cit.

³⁵ See, for example, Hippolyte Fofack, “Overcoming the colonial development model of resource extraction for sustainable development in Africa,” Brookings Institution (January 31, 2019) (arguing that “the continued reliance on colonial-era ‘extractivist’ development models has marginalized Africa in the global economic and trading

Create and Manage Peripheral Markets

It has long been a staple of the theory of imperialism, at least in quasi-Marxist circles, that during the period of European domination, “an international division of labor and resulting trade in basic commodities” and “the organization of production along capitalist lines so as to sell in markets in order to realize maximum profit” produced a widening gap in political and economic power between metropolitan and peripheral areas. This gap, it has been claimed,

grows most rapidly when political-economic power is concentrated in a dominant core power which is able to organize imperialistically international economic, financial, and political relations in a self-interested fashion. Concentrations of core power have invariably led to expansion by core states via trade, investment, political influence, and control.³⁶

One need not be a Marxist, however, to recognize that the 19th Century—which saw both the rise of modern industrial manufacturing in European countries and the creation of vast, high-volume international networks of trade facilitated by new technologies such as railways and steamships—was one which saw enormous growth in metropole-centered trading networks. For the United

environment. It has also markedly increased the region’s exposure to global volatility and risks associated with long-term deterioration of commodity terms of trade—the ratio between a country’s export prices and its import prices”), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/overcoming-the-colonial-development-model-of-resource-extraction-for-sustainable-development-in-africa/>.

³⁶ Patrick J. McGowan & Brohdan Kordan, “Imperialism in World-System Perspective: Britain 1870-1914,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 1981, pp. 44 & 48, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600210?seq=6>.

Kingdom, which built the iconic empire of the period, this meant a strong ideological attraction to free trade relationships, with British industrialists and entrepreneurs successfully lobbying Parliament to repeal protectionist legislation and expand trading opportunities.³⁷ Thereafter, the late 19th Century saw a huge expansion of trade, with global trade-to-output ratios between 1870 and 1913 rising, for the first time, to modern levels.³⁸

(The overwhelming commercial and industrial-productive advantages that had accrued as a result of Britain's "first-mover" advantage in the Industrial Revolution—as well as its dominant position in maritime trade and global naval power—surely also made it easier for Britons to be enthusiastic free traders. By 1815, the British empire "had no serious rival,"³⁹ and indeed the strength of its industrial competition undercut Continental European manufacturers so much that collapsing domestic demand led to layoffs and bankruptcies that contributed to the revolutionary upheavals of 1848.⁴⁰ By the 1870s, other European powers such as Germany had begun backing *away* from free trade to protect domestic producers from such competition.⁴¹)

Yet even the famously free-trading 19th Century British were not *unqualified* supporters of commercial *laissez-faire*, and they felt perfectly free to impose significant tariffs on

³⁷ See generally, e.g., U.K. Parliament, "Regulation and Free Trade in the 19th Century," undated, available at <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/tradeindustry/industrycommunity/overview/19thcentury/>.

³⁸ See, e.g., Antoni Esteveordal, Brian Frantz, & Alan M. Taylor, "The Rise and Fall of World Trade, 1870-1939," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 118, No. 2, May 2003, pp. 360-361, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25053910?seq=3>.

³⁹ Evans, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 644.

many goods. (To give just one example, Britain's tariff structure for alcohol discriminated sharply on the basis of point of origin, protecting rum produced in Britain's own colonies—not to mention gin and whisky made in Britain itself—from competition from foreign-produced spirits, while discriminating against French-produced alcohols.⁴²) According to the economic historian John Nye, the conventional wisdom that Britain followed a resolutely free-trade approach while France, for instance, took a more protectionist one, therefore, "is simply wrong."⁴³ Meanwhile, *within* imperial domains such as India, it remained

possible, throughout most of the period of the British Raj, to use the governing power to extort in the form of taxes and monopolies such valuable primary products as opium and salt. Direct governmental promotion of products required by British—all of these techniques of direct political control were employed in ways which seem alien to the so-called age of *laissez-faire*.⁴⁴

Nor did the free trade enthusiasm of earlier decades in the 19th Century survive entirely unscathed until its end. Indeed, while trade and capital flows between the European powers still continued to grow significantly until 1914, many powers—among them Germany, France, Sweden, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Spain, the Balkan states,

⁴² John Vincent Nye, "The myth of free-trade Britain and fortress France: Tariffs and trade in the nineteenth century," in *Classical Trade Protectionism 1815-1914*, Jean-Pierre Dormois & Pedro Lains, eds., Routledge, 2017, p. 25, available at <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/24286/1005845.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁴³ Nye, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴⁴ John Gallagher & Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1953, p. 4, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2591017?seq=1>.

and the Ottoman Empire—imposed new protectionist tariffs in certain sectors from the 1870s onward.”⁴⁵

Perhaps a safer conclusion would thus be that 19th Century imperialism indeed favored the expansion of trading networks, but that it focused more upon the enlargement of trade with one’s “own” peripheral regions than upon a more generalized and nondiscriminatory expansion. The metropolitan powers of the period prized hub-and-spoke relationships.

Creating a Co-Opted Compradore Class

It would be surprising if such extensive involvement by metropolitan powers in the economic affairs of the periphery had not led to the development of at least some cadre of local compradore elites who functioned as intermediaries for metropolitan economic interests in local affairs. Theorists of European imperialism, for instance, have long noted the emergence of “luxury consumption by pre-capitalist or compradore ruling classes” in the developing world—which, has been claimed, has been directed especially “towards land speculation, usury and other unproductive purposes” and has supposedly contributed to much of the world’s pervasive “underdevelopment under imperialism.”⁴⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the degree to which it is actually true that the developing world’s enduring problems of local elite corruption stem specifically from neo-imperialist policies of the metropolitan European

⁴⁵ Guillaume Daudin, Matthias Morys, and Kevin O’Rourke, “Europe and Globalization, 1870-1914,” *HAL Open Science*, 2008, p. 15, available at <https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03459830/document>.

⁴⁶ See generally, for example, Ernest Mandel, “The Driving Forces of Imperialism,” in *Spheres of Influence in the age of imperialism*, Ken Coates, ed., Nottingham, 1972, available at <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6700>.

powers, but it is certainly the case that no small number of scholars have maintained such theories,⁴⁷ and hard to contest that, at least in some respects, “corruption in developing countries has deep historical roots.”⁴⁸

Feelings of Civilizational Superiority

The fact that the European powers of imperialism’s 19th Century heyday indulged strong feelings of civilizational superiority and often quite virulent forms of racist condescension against more peripheral regions and peoples is well enough understood to require little comment.⁴⁹ The Europeans’ overweening civilizational self-confidence of this period was one supercharged by Industrial Revolution dynamism and material power vis-à-vis more “backward” regions, and it was encouraged by the excitement of Enlightenment insights and the accomplishments of 17th Century experimental science, both of which had been highly concentrated in Europe. It was also bolstered by the assumptions of “Whig” historians about the march of human progress,⁵⁰ and perhaps egged on by well-

⁴⁷ See, for example, Merima Ali, Odd-Helge Fjeldstad, & Abdulaziz B. Shifa, “The Colonial Legacy of Corruption Among Local Elites in Africa,” *African Economic History Network*, July 19, 2021, available at <https://www.aehnetwork.org/blog/the-colonial-legacy-of-corruption-among-local-elites-in-africa/>.

⁴⁸ Luis Angeles & Kyriakos C. Neanidis, “Colonialism, Elite Formation[,] and Corruption,” University of Glasgow, June 8, 2010, available at https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_186044_smxx.pdf.

⁴⁹ For a general, if generally hostile, discussion of British racial and cultural attitudes toward other peoples in the peripheral world of the 19th Century, see Trevor Harris, “Britannia super omnes: Race theory and the Imperial Sentiment in Victorian Britain,” in *Victorian Paradoxes*, William Finlay, ed., Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2005, p. 29, available at <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/4676?lang=en>.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Herbert Butterfield, “The Whig Interpretation of History,” 1931, pp. 2 & 11 (describing what is said to be “the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to

intentioned, if sometimes heavy-handed and chauvinist, interest in saving foreign souls in the wake of the “Second Great Awakening” of Protestant Christianity that began in the United States and helped lead to Britain’s Victorian age being described as “the high-water mark of evangelicalism in Britain, as evangelical beliefs and practices then profoundly influenced British domestic and colonial life, thought, and policy.”⁵¹

Far less creditably, these attitudes of civilizational superiority were also nourished in darker ways by rationalizations developed to paper over the brutalities of the African slave trade⁵²—which otherwise might have

praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present,” so that “historical personages can easily and irresistibly be classed into the men who furthered progress and the men who tried to hinder it,” and thus that “the whig historian can draw lines through certain events, some such line as that which leads through Martin Luther and a long succession of whigs to modern liberty”), available at http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/LojkoMiklos/Butterfield,_The_W hig_ Interpretation_of_History_highlights.pdf.

⁵¹ See generally, for example, Richard Gibson & Timothy Larsen, “Evangelicism,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, November 29, 2018, available at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199799558/obo-9780199799558-0071.xml>. Christian missionaries were important and often highly entrepreneurial stakeholders in European overseas engagement during the 19th Century, with missionary societies very active in Africa and later in China, and with some prominent imperialist figures such as General Charles “Chinese” Gordon being noted evangelicals. See generally, for example, Daniel H. Bays, “The Foreign Missionary Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” National Humanities Center, available at <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/fmmovementb.htm>; Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa*, University of California Press, 2011, pp. 83-121 (discussing life of Charles Gordon).

⁵² See, for example, David Olusoga, “The roots of European racism lie in the slave trade, colonialism – and Edward Long,” *The Guardian*, September 8, 2015, available at

seemed painfully dissonant with Enlightenment values, as indeed they were eventually, if belatedly, understood to be—and by Social Darwinist assumptions about the respective competitive “fitness” of human populations as conceived in essentialist racial-ethnic terms.⁵³ Taken together, these various factors produced a potent 19th Century brew in which European superiority was seen as axiomatic—a worldview that some of its most trenchant detractors have described as an ideology of European dominance, “universalistic, elitist[,] and Chauvinistic.”⁵⁴ As Richard Evans has noted, the “assumption of European superiority over ‘savages’” was “powerful and influential” in the imperialism of the 19th Century.⁵⁵

Claims of Proprietary Interests in Metropole’s “Own” People Everywhere

European powers were for many decades quite willing to claim some kind of jurisdiction over what were felt to be their “own” people, even when such persons were not within the reach of their domestic territorial jurisdiction at

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/08/european-racism-africa-slavery>.

⁵³ See, for example, Philip D. Curtin, “The ‘Scientific’ Roots: Nineteenth-Century Racism,” in *Imperialism* P.D. Curtin, ed., Palgrave MacMillan, 1971 (noting that “From the 1870’s into the 1920’s and beyond, virtually every European concerned with imperial theory or imperial administration believed that physical racial appearance was an outward sign of inborn propensities, inclinations, and abilities. ... One of the roots of racist thought came from the biological sciences, especially from the prestige accorded to biological discovery. Biologists were all too willing to step from their own field of specialization and comment with confidence on human history and society.”), available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-00123-1_1.

⁵⁴ Donna Richards, “The Ideology of European Dominance,” *Presence Africaine*, No. 111, 3e Trimestre 1979, p. 6, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24350048?seq=4>.

⁵⁵ Evans, op. cit., p. 643.

all. This was especially the case in the relationships between strong and dynamic European states and the declining realms of the Ottoman Empire and Qing Dynasty China.

Accustomed to administering the affairs of their Christian and Jewish subjects through a somewhat indirect system of managed local self-rule under the so-called *millet* system,⁵⁶ for instance, Ottoman sultans had long taken a somewhat relaxed view of such arrangements. As early as 1580, the English were granted certain "Capitulations," under which London acquired an extraterritorial role in managing disputes between Englishmen in Ottoman domains. As it was said at the time, "if the English should have disputes one with another, let their . . . ambassador and consul decide (them) according to their usage."⁵⁷

Taking things a step further, under the 1774 Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji, Russia's tsars acquired—among other things—"explicit rights of interceding for the [Ottoman] sultan's Orthodox subjects who resided in Moldavia and Wallachia." A year later, Catherine II ("the Great") expanded this small legal foothold into a sweeping political claim of tsarist authority over matters related to Orthodox Christians *anywhere* in the Ottoman realm: a declaration "that the treaty gave Russia an ill-defined prerogative to intercede for all of the sultan's Orthodox Christians."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See generally, for example, Kamel S. Abu Jaber, "The Millet System in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 57, No. 3, July 1967, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1967.tb01260.x>.

⁵⁷ John P. Spagnolo, "Portents of Empire in Britain's Ottoman Extraterritorial Jurisdiction," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April 1991, p. 261, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283436?seq=1>.

⁵⁸ Theophilus C. Prousis, "Russia's Position toward Ottoman Orthodox Christians: An 1816 Instruction from the Foreign Ministry," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 2002), pp. 334-335, available at

Eventually, almost *all* European powers would enjoy some form of such extraterritorial jurisdiction over their “own” sorts of person in Ottoman lands, with things apparently going even further in Egypt with the establishment of a system of “mixed courts” having jurisdiction over a great range of civil and commercial disputes involving Europeans, managed under the oversight of *fourteen* European states. This was in turn eventually superseded by the granting of outright extraterritorial rights in Egypt for European powers over their own nationals.⁵⁹

Such claims of extraterritorial proprietary interest even helped lead to the Crimean War, with French claims for special privileges for Catholics within the Ottoman Empire clashing with Russian ones on behalf of Orthodox Christians. In response to the unnerving approach of a French battleship to Istanbul, the Ottomans decided to give the keys to the Church of the Nativity to the Catholic community in the Holy Land, but this affront to Orthodox sensibilities led to an angry Russian mobilization and then invasion of Moldavia and Wallachia. Assured of British support against Russia, however, the Sultan responded by declaring war in 1853, thus igniting a costly conflict in which Britain, France, and the Ottomans joined forces against the Russians.⁶⁰

A loosely analogous system of European extraterritoriality was developed in China during the 19th Century. The Manchu elites who ruled China during the

https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=ahis_facpub.

⁵⁹ Tunçer, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 & 86.

⁶⁰ See generally, for example, Mikael Yalanuzyan, “The 1853-1856 Crimean War and Deep Contradictions in the International Order,” *EVN Report*, July 18, 2022, available at <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/the-1853-1856-crimean-war-and-deep-contradictions-in-the-international-order/>.

Qing Dynasty had permitted some degree of intra-communal self-policing by Arabs in Canton and Portuguese at Macao, and also permitted foreign consuls in Canton to handle civil cases exclusively between their own nationals there. As with the Ottomans and the abovementioned Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji, however, the Russians took the lead in moving things farther. Under the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, China and Russia were each given the right of extradition for their own nationals accused of committing a crime within the other country; subsequent treaties of 1727 and 1768 elaborated these arrangements further, giving each the right to try criminals of its own nationality.⁶¹

The first trade agreement between Britain's East India Company (EIC) and Chinese officials at Canton recognized the jurisdiction of EIC agents over their English servants, but in 1839—much to the dismay of Chinese officials—the Company also began handling at least some criminal matters between British nationals and Chinese locals.⁶² After China's defeat in the Opium War, the Qing formally recognized British extraterritorial jurisdiction, and it was established that "persons of each [country], accused of crime, were to be tried by judges and in accordance with the law of their respective countries." Eventually, such extraterritorial jurisdiction in China was secured by nineteen foreign states: Russia, Great Britain, the United

⁶¹ Harold Scott Quigley, "Extraterritoriality in China," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 1926, p. 48, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2188806?seq=3>.

⁶² Quigley, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50. As Stephen Platt has recounted, foreigners in China had always previously complied with Chinese orders that foreign citizens who commit offenses against locals be handed over to Chinese authorities. In July 1839, however, a gang of drunken British sailors killed a Chinese villager on Kowloon, but the British refused to turn them over for prosecution. This was one of the precipitating events of the Opium War. See Stephen R. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*, Vintage, 2019, p. 391.

States, France, Sweden and Norway, the German Customs Union, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Peru, Brazil, Portugal, Japan, Mexico, and Switzerland.⁶³ The semi-extraterritorial enclaves of the European “treaty ports” in China were one of the notable innovations of 19th Century imperialism, contrasting sharply with previous approaches to foreign trading in East Asia, under which local rulers traditionally kept foreign traders in closely-monitored enclaves with only limited residence rights.⁶⁴

Gunboat Diplomacy

In light of the European metropolises’ superiority to peripheral regions in terms of technological capacity during the 19th Century—a period that as a result of the Industrial Revolution saw a “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) with the advent of new and far more effective tools of warmaking and expeditionary power projection in the form of railroads, the telegraph, rifled firearms, and armored steam-powered warships⁶⁵—it is perhaps not surprising that the explosion of European links to and interests in the global periphery led some metropolitan powers to turn to

⁶³ Quigley, *op. cit.*, p. 51 (this list is in chronological order, based upon the date at which such privileges were first established).

⁶⁴ Of the many such ports created by 1915, however, “only seven ever had European minicolonies within their boundaries,” and only two—Shanghai and Tianjin—had any significant foreign enclaves therein. Jurgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Patrick Camiller, trans., Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 289-290.

⁶⁵ See, for example., Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 47 (noting the importance of “the history of the hundred years after the Opium War” to Chinese nationalism, for that conflict began “the shock of the century of humiliation, which still affects Chinese thought today and forms the national trauma attached to the Chinese people’s collective memory”).

force to resolve disputes and protect their perceived interests.

European powers intervened routinely in other peoples' affairs during the 19th Century for a great many reasons. Sometimes this was to protect Christian missionaries, sometimes to protect property or financial investments. As the economic and military gap between developed and developed countries grew ever wider in the years after the First Industrial Revolution picked up steam, the European powers became increasingly interested in safeguarding "their" port installations, mines, factories, and real estate around the world, and interventions became increasingly common.⁶⁶ Overwhelming military superiority produces its temptations, after all, and one can scarcely consider European metropolitan military intervention in peripheral regions during this period without remembering Hillaire Belloc's grimly reassuring imperialist witticism about the advantage machine guns gave British troops against restive natives: "Whatever happens, we have got / The Maxim Gun, and they have not."⁶⁷

We have already seen, for instance, that Britain was successful in resolving the debt crises of the Egyptian Khedive in London's favor through the expedient of a military campaign, and to this day Chinese nationalists date the beginning of their country's "Century of Humiliation" to the quick work British gunboats made of Qing Dynasty

⁶⁶ See, for example, Osterhammel, op. cit., p. 498.

⁶⁷ H.B. [Hillaire Belloc] & B.T.B., *The Modern Traveler*, Edward Arnold, 1898, p. 41 ("[William] Blood understood the Native mind. / He said: 'We must be firm but kind.' / A Mutiny resulted. / I never shall forget the way / That Blood upon this awful day / Preserved us all from death. / He stood upon a little mound, / Cast his lethargic eyes around, / And said beneath his breath: / 'Whatever happens we have got / The Maxim Gun, and they have not.'"), available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61521/61521-h/61521-h.htm>.

forces in the Opium War beginning in 1839.⁶⁸ The phrase “gunboat diplomacy” has come to describe much of the episodic European interventionism of the era, particularly where it was used to resolve lesser-order disputes short of full-scale conflict. It has thus been said to be characterized by

‘the use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss, either in furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their own state.’ Thus gunboat diplomacy is a form of coercive diplomacy carried out in peacetime or in less than war situations and is intended to secure specific advantage from another state and forfeits its diplomatic character if it either contemplates the infliction of injury unrelated to obtaining that advantage or commits an otherwise act of war. Hence coercive, gunboat diplomacy is an alternative to war and if it leads to war then we must not only hold that it has failed,

⁶⁸ See, for example, Deborah Welch Larson & Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 2019, p. 54 (quoting the Chinese official Wei Yuan (1794-1857) who, upon witnessing the Qing loss in the Opium War, in his *Records of the Conquest* “introduced a theme that would recur repeatedly, even in modern China – humiliation as a motivation for reforms to restore China’s greatness. In the preface, quoting from an ancient Confucian classical text, Wei wrote: ‘Humiliation stimulates effort; when the country is humiliated, its spirit will be aroused.’”). This theme has remained remarkably constant in Chinese thinking and propaganda ever since. Bertrand Badie has recounted, for instance, that in the PLA military parade of October 2009 on the 60th anniversary of the PRC’s founding, “each soldier was ordered to march 1969 steps, one for each year separating China from the humiliating Opium War that brought the Middle Kingdom into conflict with Europe.” Bertrand Badie, *Humiliation in International Relations: A Pathology of Contemporary International Systems*, Jeff Lewis, trans., Hart, 2016, pp. 95-96.

but hesitate to give the name gunboat diplomacy. The other important aspect of gunboat diplomacy is that it must be accompanied by political diplomacy since it is an extension of the same. If there is no accompanying political diplomacy, there can be no gunboat diplomacy.⁶⁹

For many years, it has been observed, “gunboat diplomacy was peculiarly European,”⁷⁰ and it was far from uncommon for creditors to

use military power to enforce debt contracts. They blockaded, cannonaded, even invaded nations that refused to honor financial commitments. ... The 1800s have thus been called ‘a century of gunboat diplomacy’ in which ‘countries blockaded ports until debt service was resumed’ and the use of force for the collection of debts was axiomatic.⁷¹

⁶⁹ P.K. Ghosh, “Revisiting Gunboat Diplomacy: An Instrument of Threat or Use of Limited Naval Force,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 26, No. 11, February 2001, available at https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_feb01ghp01.html.

⁷⁰ According to Sharman, in fact, it is a phenomenon that even preceded the RMA of the 19th Century. J.C. Sharman, *Power and Profit at Sea: The Rise of the West in the Making of the International System*, “*International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2019, p. 163 [from the Abstract] (“European expansion and the creation of the first global international system was built on dominance at sea centuries before Europeans’ general military superiority on land.”), available at <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/43/4/163/12222/Power-and-Profit-at-Sea-The-Rise-of-the-West-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⁷¹ Michael Tomz, “Enforcement by Gunboats,” prepublication manuscript, October 2006, pp. 176-177, available at https://economichistory.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/69/2017/07/tomz_powerandmoney.pdf.

The Case of China

Readers unfamiliar with the literature on European imperialism but who have been following modern PRC foreign policy—and especially its abandonment of the strategic caution of Deng Xiaoping’s “bide your time and hide your capabilities” approach to geopolitics in favor of a much more assertive and heavy-handed engagement with the world⁷²—may by now have sensed some familiar themes in the foregoing account of European imperialism. The following pages will draw out such comparisons in more detail.

Leveraging “Earlier Mover” Advantage

It is not merely that Chinese leaders appreciate the extraordinary ways in which—as we have seen above—the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s and early 1800s “supercharged” Britain and other European powers and gave them the economic resources and technological capabilities to dominate the world during the 19th Century and into the 20th. It is also that China’s current rulers take that explosion of economic and technological power, and

⁷² Deng is widely remembered for his 24-character directive to “[o]bserve the situation calmly; stand firm in our position; deal with matters calmly; hide our capabilities and bide our time to make a comeback; maintain a low profile; never seek leadership.” John W. Garver, *China’s Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 517. Xi Jinping, however, has “formally abandoned the deliberate gradualism of Deng’s ‘hide and bide’ orthodoxy that had been followed by Xi’s predecessors for the previous three decades. Xi instead decreed a new, confident, assertive international policy activism in prosecution of China’s strategic interests.” Anonymous, “The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy,” *Atlantic Council*, 2021, p. 42; see also generally Ford, *China Looks at the West*, op. cit., pp. 391-411; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 159-259.

the geopolitical benefits that accrued to the European imperialists of the time, as a *model* for their own trajectory in the 21st Century. As this author has noted elsewhere, “Chinese leaders attribute those global power differentials [of the imperialist era] to Europe’s first-mover successes in technological innovation during the Industrial Revolution.”⁷³ Chinese leaders see the Western powers as having used that first-mover position to create an entire world order around themselves, so that – as the PRC’s State Council Information office has phrased it – “[i]nternational politics and the economic system have been dominated by Western powers since the First Industrial Revolution.”⁷⁴ As Xi Jinping told an audience in Johannesburg in 2018 on the topic of “Collaborating for Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity in the 4th Industrial Revolution,”

[t]he previous three industrial revolutions were all characterized by transformative advancement in science and technology: the rise of mechanization in the 18th century, the harnessing of electricity in the 19th century, and the advent of the Information Age in the 20th century.⁷⁵

Envisioning such prior revolutions as having first made Britain dominant in the international arena and then having

⁷³ Christopher A. Ford, “Running Faster for the ‘Commanding Heights’ of the Next Industrial Revolution?” remarks to Metron’s 2023 corporate strategy retreat, September 12, 2023, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/running-faster-for-the-commanding-heights-of-the-next-industrial-revolution>.

⁷⁴ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China and the World in the New Era,” September 27, 2019, Part III, § (1), available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/27/c_138427541.htm.

⁷⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Full text of Chinese president’s speech at plenary session of BRICS Johannesburg Summit,” July 26, 2018, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2018zt/xgswfcxjx_gjmlqs/201807/t20180727_710205.html.

allowed the United States to take over as the central state in the world-system, China now aims seize for *itself* the first-mover position in a “fourth industrial revolution” – with all this entails.⁷⁶

Accordingly, trying to plan China’s way to success in such a new industrial revolution is the centerpiece of the PRC’s industrial policy. By 2035, the CCP has promised, “major breakthroughs will be achieved in key and core technologies, and China will enter the first rank of innovation-oriented countries.”⁷⁷ And, it is claimed, by 2049,

China’s manufacturing sector status will become more consolidated and China will become the leader among the world’s manufacturing powers.

We will have the capability to lead innovation and possess competitive advantages in major manufacturing areas, and will develop advanced technology and industrial systems.⁷⁸

By that point, the centennial of the CCP’s own seizure of power in China and a suitable coda to the saga of the “Century of Humiliation” the country is said to have suffered at imperialist hands, Party officials expect that China will have finally achieved full “national rejuvenation”⁷⁹ and will have returned to the top-of-the-

⁷⁶ See Doshi, op. cit., pp. 278 & 286-287.

⁷⁷ National People’s Congress, *Outline of the People’s Republic of China 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035*, published by Xinhua News Agency, March 12, 2021 (hereinafter “14th FYP”), p. 7, available at <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/china-14th-five-year-plan/> (Chinese source <https://perma.cc/73AK-BUW2>).

⁷⁸ State Council of the PRC, *Made in China 2025*, July 7, 2015, § 2.3, p. 8, available at <http://www.cittadellascienza.it/cina/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/IoT-ONE-Made-in-China-2025.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Cf. Zheng Wang, op. cit., p. 129 (noting that CCP phrasing about “rejuvenation” [*fixing*] invokes the idea of a past glory, to which one is

heap global status it deserves—a status of which it feels it was robbed by the beneficiaries of the *first three* industrial revolutions.

Using Infrastructure Development to Create Hub-and-Spoke Relationships

The breadth and extent of the infrastructure projects—undertaken worldwide, but especially concentrated in Southeast and Central Asia—began under the *aegis* of the PRC’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which was originally known as “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), are well known, but their extent is remarkable nonetheless. It has become “the world’s largest infrastructure program” and consists of

a global network of land, maritime, space, and undersea fiber optic channels, loosely identified as ‘belts’ on land and ‘roads’ at sea. It includes an expanding set of other ‘economic corridors,’ from energy to digital information to health. Within each channel, Chinese entities partner with local host nation corporations and government authorities on a wide variety of projects: transportation infrastructure, logistical data management, communications networks, satellite navigation systems, and many others. With over 140 partner states, the BRI represents thus far an investment of \$1 to \$8 trillion.⁸⁰

returning, thus invoking historical memory both of past greatness and centrality, and of past humiliation).

⁸⁰ “China’s National Development Strategy and Industrial Policy: A Path to Comprehensive National Power,” MITRE Corporation paper prepared for the U.S. Air Force Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis, January 2022, pp. 31-32.

The effort expanded with breathtaking rapidity. When China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000, it had very little trade with Africa. Twenty years on, however, it had become “the dominant export player in all but two countries, the Central African Republic and Zimbabwe,” loaning \$100 billion to the region by 2015 alone, mostly in connection with such infrastructure projects.⁸¹ In South America, the figures for 2000-2017 were comparably large, with than \$100 billion in Chinese investment and \$140 million in loans.⁸²

This effort is testament to Xi Jinping’s relentless focus upon creating what he describes as structural “connectivity” between China and the rest of the world. Indeed, Xi seems to speak almost obsessively about the importance of using the BRI to build ever-greater “connectivity” with the rest of the world through “infrastructure connectivity, trade links, capital flows, and bonds between peoples.” This kind of “greater connectivity,” he has said, “involves every front, is multi-dimensional, and forms a network.”⁸³ Its purpose, he says, is

⁸¹ By 2018, this including building 30,000 kilometers of roads, 2,000 kilometers of railways, port capacity of some 85 million tonnes per year, and 30,000 kilometers of power lines. Robert Winder, *Soft Power: The New Great Game*, Little, Brown, 2021, p. 273.

⁸² Ibid., p. 289. China’s two-way trade with Latin America had been about \$18 billion in 2002, but by 2022 the figure had grown to \$450 billion. Although the United States still remained the largest trading partner for Latin America as a whole, China had claimed that title specifically for South America. See “The sleepwalkers,” *The Economist*, July 6, 2024, p. 25.

⁸³ Xi Jinping, “Deepening Connectivity as Partners and Jointly Building a Community of Common Development and a Shared Future,” remarks at the Dialogue on Becoming Better Connected Partners, November 8, 2014, in Xi Jinping, *Speeches on Diplomacy*, Vol. 1, Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2022 (hereinafter “*Speeches on Diplomacy 1*”), pp. 232-233.

to facilitate smoother economic circulation in the Asia Pacific, thereby expanding potential economic and social development. Connectivity should be equally emphasized in infrastructure, institutional regulation, and people-to-people exchanges, while the coordination of policies, the linking of infrastructures, the opening up of trade routes, the flow of capital, and the fostering of friendship between peoples should also go hand in hand.⁸⁴

Such connections include “hardware connectivity,” “software connectivity that enhances alignment and coordination of policies, law, and regulations and creates convenient and effective supply chains,” and “human connectivity” that “promotes people-to-people exchanges and fosters friendship and trust.”⁸⁵ In sum, Xi wishes China to build around itself a network that will “upgrade infrastructure and build comprehensive connectivity ... connecting physical structures, rules and regulations, and the hearts and minds of people,” essentially everywhere.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Xi Jinping, “The Leading Role of the Asia Pacific in Meeting Global Economic Challenges,” remarks at the APEC CEO Summit, November 18, 2015, in *Speeches on Diplomacy 1*, op. cit., p. 403.

⁸⁵ Xi Jinping, “Striving for Greater Progress in Regional Cooperation and Ushering in a Brighter Future for the Asia Pacific,” remarks at the opening ceremony of the APC CEO Summit, November 9, 2014, in *Speeches on Diplomacy 1*, op. cit., pp. 242-243.

⁸⁶ Xi Jinping, “Shaping the Future through Asia Pacific Partnership,” remarks at 22nd APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting, November 11, 2014, in *Speeches on Diplomacy 1*, op. cit., p. 252; see also Xi Jinping, “Deepening Connectivity as Partners and Jointly Building a Community of Common Development and a Shared Future,” remarks at the Dialogue on Becoming Better Connected Partners, November 8, 2014, in *Speeches on Diplomacy 1*, op. cit., pp. 232-233 (“Today, the connectivity we need to build is not just about creating roads and bridges or making linear and surface connections. Instead it should be more about three integrated pillars—infrastructure, rules and institutions, and flows of people. It should involve equal priority being given to progress in give

The key point, however—though not one publicly emphasized by Chinese officials—is that this network is one that centers upon China. Indeed, its architecture is fundamentally bilateral and asymmetric, doing more to link BRI partners to China than to help them build any kind of independent connectivity, and thus also inescapably leading to ever-deepening relationships of dependency upon the PRC's huge economic base. BRI projects may, or may not, boost the economic growth of China's infrastructure partners, but they essentially *always* increase those partners' dependence upon China.

This asymmetry is not accidental, but in fact seems to be rather the point. As with the concept of "dual circulation" discussed below, there may be mutual economic gain involved, but the key—from China's perspective, at any rate—is to ensure the kind of dependencies that create webs of leverage of which China can thereafter take advantage.⁸⁷

The physical and digital aspects of the BRI's worldwide projects, moreover, may also offer very tangible potential *military* benefits for China. Under the rubric of the "Military-Civil Fusion" (MCF) strategy that has been pursued by the PRC for many years—and which was elevated to a top-level national priority under Xi Jinping in 2017—the CCP aims not merely to "integrate" but in fact to "fuse" China's civilian economic and industrial sector and

areas—policy communication, infrastructure connectivity, trade links, capital flows, and bonds between peoples. This is a kind of greater connectivity that involves every front, is multi-dimensional, and forms a network, and that creates an open system enabling dynamism and flows of talent and resources.").

⁸⁷ See generally, for example, Ford, "Xi Jinping, Michel Foucault, and Spy Balloons?," *op. cit.*, pp. 43-54; Christopher A. Ford, "Systems and Strategy: Causal Maps, Complexity, and Strategic Competition," MITRE Center for Strategic Competition *Occasional Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 7, November 14, 2022, pp. 3-4, available at <https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Systems%20and%20Strategy%20Paper%20FINAL2.pdf>.

its defense sector, so that there is nothing in either one that cannot be leveraged by the Party in support of strategic objectives.⁸⁸ One aspect of MCF, for instance, is something called the Fundamental Domain Resource Sharing System (FDRSS):

This system includes building military requirements into the construction of civilian infrastructure from the ground up as well as leveraging China's civilian construction and logistics capacities and capabilities for military purposes. This includes factoring military requirements and dual-use purposes into building civilian private and public transportation infrastructure such as airports, port facilities, railways, roads, and communications networks. This also extends to infrastructure projects in dual-use domains such as space and undersea as well as mobile communications networks and topographical and meteorological systems. Another element seeks to set common military and civilian standards to make infrastructure easier to use in emergencies and wartime. ... It may also have important implications for the PRC's overseas infrastructure projects and investments under BRI as the PRC seeks to establish a more robust overseas logistics and

⁸⁸ On MCF, see generally, for example, U.S. Department of State, "Military-Civil Fusion and the People's Republic of China," available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/What-is-MCF-One-Pager.pdf>; Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "The PRC's 'Military-Civil Fusion' Strategy is a Global Security Threat," DipNote blog post, Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, U.S. Department of State, March 16, 2020, available at <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2510>.

basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power.⁸⁹

(It is also worth noting that as the CCP sees things, there is also a “Brezhnev Doctrine”⁹⁰ aspect to BRI engagement: one is strongly encouraged to *enter* China’s controlling embrace, but one must not ever *leave* it. When Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni suggested in 2023 that Italy might leave the BRI, the CCP mouthpiece *Global Times*—which is owned and controlled by the CCP flagship newspaper *People’s Daily*—threatened that “[i]f Italy decides to withdraw ... there is every reason to be concerned about the potential negative impact.”⁹¹)

In light of these webs of asymmetric leverage and the potential for rapid, “plug-and-play” exploitation of overseas BRI port infrastructure and “digital silk road”

⁸⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, October 2023 (hereinafter “DoD 2023 China Report”), p. 31, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

⁹⁰ This “doctrine” takes its name from a speech given by Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in 1968 defending the USSR’s military intervention to crush political liberalization in Czechoslovakia, essentially announcing that a country’s takeover by Communism was a one-way trip, and backsliding would not be permitted. According to Brezhnev, “Czechoslovakia’s withdrawal from the socialist community with talking about the right of nations to self-determination” would have “come into conflict with its own vital interests and would have been detrimental to the other socialist states.” Accordingly, he said, “the U.S.S.R. and the other socialist states had to act decisively and they did act against the antisocialist forces in Czechoslovakia” by invading and occupying the country. “Brezhnev Doctrine: Speech by First Secretary of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev,” November 13, 1968, available at <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1968BrezhnevDoctrine.pdf>.

⁹¹ “GT Voice: Italy’s BRI decision should be made without US influence,” *Global Times*, July 24, 2023, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294968.shtml>.

projects for military purposes, it may be a mistake to think of the BRI as being *primarily* about economics, trade, or development at all. From Beijing's perspective, the BRI is a *strategic* tool of national power. Indeed, even in military terms, BRI would appear to be a tool at least as ambitious in its scope and breadth than European imperialist projects such as the network of naval coaling stations the British established to support global Royal Navy operations with the transition to steam power in the 19th Century.⁹² If one then also factors in the ways in which such infrastructure projects create widespread dependence upon China across the developing world in the form of "leverage webs"⁹³ that can be manipulated for political and economic advantage as well, the remarkable ambition of the program becomes clear.

Infrastructure Dependency on Expatriate Metropolitan Personnel

Massive infrastructure projects such as those of the BRI, of course, do not build themselves: they require considerable amounts of labor, both skilled and unskilled. As with many of the imperialists' railway and other infrastructure projects of the 19th Century, however, while metropolitan efforts may result in the creation of new infrastructure in the periphery—and perhaps a short-term boost in the employment of local unskilled labor—there is often remarkably little transfer of expert knowledge to local populations in ways that would allow peripheral states

⁹² See generally, for example, Steven Gray, "Fueling mobility: coal and Britain's naval power, c.1870-1914," *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 58, October 2017, p. 92, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305748817301275>.

⁹³ The term is the present author's, however, not that of the CCP. See Ford, "Systems and Strategy," *op. cit.*, at p. 3.

thereafter to sustain such infrastructures, much less to expand them.

China sends veritable armies of technicians, engineers, and other specialists to implement BRI projects in places such as Africa. Estimates vary, but according to the China Africa Research Initiative, there were 263,659 Chinese workers in Africa in 2015, though this had dropped to 104,074 in 2020 as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.⁹⁴

These global Chinese migrant workers mostly keep to themselves. They live in temporary barracks or apartment blocks, communicate with native workers in an amalgam of Mandarin, English[,] and the local language and generally have little contact with the general population of their host country.”⁹⁵

Temporary labor migrants, they work for and are sponsored by Chinese (and in some cases, African) companies on fixed-term contracts commonly one to three years in duration. “Most Chinese labor contractors are employed by Chinese state-owned companies in construction and resource extraction projects; many of these

⁹⁴ China Africa Research Initiative, “Data: Chinese Workers in Africa,” available at [http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20top%205,at%20the%20end%20of%202021](http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20top%205,at%20the%20end%20of%202021.). By contrast, another source claims that as of 2015 there were perhaps “one million” Chinese in Africa, though less than half of this total was said to consist of temporary labor migrants. Yoon Jung Park, “One Million Chinese in Africa,” *SAIS Perspectives*, May 12, 2015, available at <http://www.saisperspectives.com/2016issue/2016/5/12/n947s9csa0ik6kmkm0bzb0hy584sfo>.

⁹⁵ Heike Klovert, “The Chinese Builders Behind Africa’s Construction Boom,” *Spiegel International*, November 28, 2019, available at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/global societies/the-chinese-workers-behind-africa-s-construction-boom-a-1298546.html>.

projects are made possible by Chinese loans made to African countries.”⁹⁶

While they *do* build infrastructure projects, moreover, many observers see their presence and the relationship they symbolize as being inherently exploitative. Some may see such exploitation as being China’s actual intention, while others might see it as an artifact of how 19th Century imperialism organized labor markets into colonial patterns of labor exploitation—patterns of which China is now simply taking advantage as a sort of follow-on imperialist.⁹⁷

(There is another parallel as well, though it is one only indirectly related to the phenomenon of temporarily exporting expatriate technicians. Just as the spread of British engineering expertise and expert personnel in constructing railway systems in the mid-19th Century led to most countries in Europe—with the exception of Spain and Russia—adopting the British standard railway gauge,⁹⁸ so too do BRI-related infrastructure projects tend to “lock in” developing countries around Chinese technical standards.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Yoon Jung Park, “One Million Chinese in Africa,” *SAIS Perspectives*, May 12, 2015, available at <http://www.saisperspectives.com/2016issue/2016/5/12/n947s9csa0ik6kmkm0bzb0hy584sfo>.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Cliff Mboya, “The Colonial Connection to Chinese Labor Disputes in Africa,” China Global South Project, October 21, 2021, available at <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/the-colonial-connection-to-chinese-labor-disputes-in-africa/>.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Evans, op. cit., pp. 152-153. The British railway gauge was not merely adopted in Britain’s colonial possessions, but became the de facto standard even across industrializing Europe, being “adopted elsewhere because of Britain’s technological dominance in the field. The Netherlands, Baden, and Russia initially opted for a wider gauge, but in the end only Russia held out.” Osterhammel, op. cit., p. 717.

⁹⁹ See, for example, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “2020 Report to Congress: Executive Summary and Recommendations,” December 2020, pp. 2, 8, & 105-107, available at

Britain's rulers may not have planned things that way, but this is quite explicitly an objective of China's national standards strategy.¹⁰⁰)

Either way, many observers feel that "Chinese investors and companies are coming to Africa to reap as much profit as possible," and that considerable exploitation results.¹⁰¹ In some cases, at the least, BRI partners' relationships with expatriate experts from the foreign metropole have reached levels of dependency and entanglement that would hardly seem out of place in late-19th Century Egypt or Tunisia. In Ethiopia, for instance, the Chinese technology companies ZTE and Huawei acquired a PRC-financed contract under which they basically *took over* the country's entire national telecommunications network: "Through these deals, Ethiopia's [government] monopoly [on telecommunications] effectively became China's monopoly."¹⁰²

Loans, Debt Burdens, and Leverage

The reader who recalls our earlier discussion of the late 19th Century economist J.A. Hobson and his description of imperialism as being driven by oversaving and

https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_Executive_Summary.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Matt Sheehan, Marjory S. Blumenthal, & Michael R. Nelson, "Three Takeaways from China's New Standards Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 28, 2021, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/10/three-takeaways-from-chinas-new-standards-strategy?lang=en>; Tim Rühlig, "The Shape of Things to Come: The Race to Control Technical Standardization," German Council on Foreign Relations, December 2, 2021, available at <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/shape-things-come-race-control-technical-standardization>.

¹⁰¹ Mboya, op. cit.

¹⁰² Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*, Yale University Press, 2020, p. 187.

underconsumption in the domestic economies of the industrialized metropolitan powers of the time, may find the story of China's BRI—and the enormous Chinese loans that have funded it—remarkably familiar. Commentators frequently describe Chinese approaches to resource extraction in regions such as Africa as being an outgrowth of China's own domestic development and dynamics,¹⁰³ and indeed recount BRI being the result of an *explicit* CCP policy of using overseas engagement as a way to soak up excess capacity in the Chinese economy. According to one scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, for instance,

[t]hese projects were seen as a solution to the issue of excess capacity that many Chinese companies faced after the 2008 global financial crisis and the Chinese government's ensuing stimulus packages, leading to an explosion in the number and location of new overseas foreign contracted projects signed by Chinese companies. In addition to explicit government encouragement urging companies to reduce supply-side structural issues by exporting surplus to developing countries, participation in BRI is further fueled by implicit pressures borne from China's socialist market economy structure.¹⁰⁴

In fact, Chinese media reports in 2015 around the time the BRI was first picking up speed confirmed this interpretation, describing the project—then known as

¹⁰³ See, for example, Wenran Jian, "Fueling the Dragon: China's Rise and Its Energy and Resources Extraction in Africa," *China Quarterly*, No. 1999, September 2009, p. 585, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27756492>.

¹⁰⁴ Nadia Clark, "The Rise and Fall of the BRI," Council on Foreign Relations blog, April 26, 2023, available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/rise-and-fall-bri>.

OBOR—as a means by which the PRC could expend overproduction. CCP officials hoped openly that that BRI would resolve the problem of overproduction and thus permit China to continue its economic expansion.¹⁰⁵ The fact that official media subsequently *discouraged* public talk about BRI as a way to absorb China’s own domestic surpluses¹⁰⁶—perhaps precisely out of a concern that the self-described anti-imperialist PRC would itself be accused of imperialism on these terms—neither makes the earlier assessment untrue nor in any way diminishes the Hobsonian resonances. The parallels are indeed quite striking.

Unsurprisingly, now that foreign observers frequently critique BRI as luring developing countries into “debt traps,” Chinese officials in more recent years have heatedly rejected that characterization. In 2023, for instance, then-Foreign Minister Qin Gang decried the idea of a BRI “debt trap,” insisting instead that “China has always been committed to helping Africa ease its debt burden.” Pointing to Beijing’s debt relief agreements with a number of African nations, he defended the BRI as nothing less than “public good” that China had chosen to provide to the developing world.¹⁰⁷

More plausibly, some observers have suggested that it would be too simplistic to describe the BRI as no more than a predatory lending scam that is being pushed upon China’s innocent partners in the developing world. BRI projects, it is pointed out, are not *forced* on recipient countries, their

¹⁰⁵ William He, “Sri Lanka: a lesson in debt-trap diplomacy,” *Think China*, July 28, 2022, available at <https://www.thinkchina.sg/sri-lanka-lesson-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Jesse Yeung, “China gave huge loans to some countries. Now it’s spending billions to bail them out,” *CNN*, March 28, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/28/economy/china-rescue-lending-belt-and-road-study-intl-hnk/index.html>.

recipients do play a role in negotiating the parameters of projects China supports, the range of BRI projects sometimes seems more piecemeal and opportunistic than coordinated in any clear way, and China has been providing economic aid and technical assistance to developing countries since the 1950s—albeit never before on such a scale, nor under the ostensible aegis of a master program of this sort.¹⁰⁸

Whether or not loans for BRI projects could generally be described as predatory lending, however, even among critics of the “debt trap” analysis there seems to be a growing consensus that the program has been struggling, and has by no means always provided benefits to recipient states. At the very least, it has been argued, BRI suffers from “poor risk management and a lack of attention to detail and cohesion from the Chinese state-owned enterprises and banks, private companies, and local governments involved.”¹⁰⁹

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of reports from BRI partner countries about construction flaws in major infrastructure projects, project cancelations initiated by BRI partner countries due to concerns over corruption and debt, project cancelations initiated by Chinese

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, the discussions in Lee Jones & Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy,’” Chatham House, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>; Mariama Diallo, “China’s BRI Brings Roads, Rails and Debt to Africa,” *Voice of America*, October 11, 2023, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-bri-brings-roads-rails-and-debt-to-africa/7306133.html>; Deborah Broutigam & Meg Rithmire, “The Chinese ‘Debt Trap’ is a Myth,” *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2021, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/>; and Hillman, op. cit., p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Clark, op. cit.

companies due to financial problems, and projects that have led to nowhere (in some cases, literally – such as a BRI-funded railway that ends in the middle of a field in Kenya) – ... [as an apparent result of] overzealous engagement on the part of both Chinese companies and BRI partners.¹¹⁰

Making matters worse, “many countries joined BRI when economic growth was quite robust and [they] didn’t expect leaner times,” such as those that have arrived with the impact of the global pandemic and the war in Ukraine.¹¹¹ And it would appear that BRI projects *have* suffered something of a crisis of unsustainability.

Between 2008 and 2021, for instance, “China spent \$240 billion bailing out 22 countries that are ‘almost exclusively’ debtors in Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road infrastructure project, including Argentina, Pakistan, Kenya[,] and Turkey.” By 2022, up to 60 percent of China’s overseas lending portfolio was in “countries in debt distress. ... Most of the countries drawing from China’s swap lines were deep in financial crisis.”¹¹² By 2023, it was reported that, with three-fifths of China’s BRI partners rated below investment grade or not rated at all, about half of 68 potential BRI borrowers studied were found to be at risk, with eight deemed to be at “high risk” of debt distress.¹¹³ (Even in 2021, one study had found that more than 40 BRI countries had debt exposure to Beijing in excess of 10 percent of their GDP, with 35 percent of the projects having encountered problems such as “corruption scandals, labour violations, environmental hazards and public

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Diallo, op. cit.

¹¹² Yeung, op. cit.

¹¹³ Elizabeth C. Economy, *The World According to China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), pp. 100-101.

protests.”¹¹⁴ One railway project in Laos, for instance—a country with a near-the-bottom rating of only 136 out of 180 in Transparency International’s global “Corruption Perceptions Index”¹¹⁵—was paid for by Chinese loans amounting to \$6 billion—a figure equal to half that country’s GDP.¹¹⁶)

Because Chinese loans are also underreported and their terms notably opaque, moreover, the problem may actually be even worse than such figures suggest.¹¹⁷ In light of these various challenges, as Jonathan Hillman suggests, whether and the degree to which BRI work comes to be seen as toxic in the developing world will depend upon whether China and BRI recipients are willing and able to apply appropriate oversight and discipline going forward.¹¹⁸ Of this, there is as yet little sign.

Whatever the BRI’s future, however, its investments have had the practical effect of entangling a great many developing countries¹¹⁹ in financial relationships with China that are as bilateral and asymmetrical¹²⁰ as they are

¹¹⁴ He, op. cit.

¹¹⁵ Transparency International, “Our Work in Laos,” 2023, available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/laos>.

¹¹⁶ Winder, op. cit., p. 315.

¹¹⁷ Economy, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

¹¹⁸ Hillman, op. cit., p. 168.

¹¹⁹ For a list of participants, at least as of 2021, see David Sacks, “Countries in China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Who’s In and Who’s Out,” Council on Foreign Relations blog, March 24, 2021, available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>. As of late 2023, there were reported to be 154 countries participating in some way or another. See Shannon Tiezzi, “How China’s Belt and Road Took Over the World,” *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2023, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/how-chinas-belt-and-road-took-over-the-world/>.

¹²⁰ As Elizabeth Economy has pointed out, when China was *itself* developing, it largely held its own debt. The BRI is a significant

opaque.¹²¹ In practice, “the initiative is effectively ‘a sea of bilateral deals’ that allow China to build export markets for its SOEs [state-owned enterprises] and create a network of countries indebted to state-run banks.”¹²²

Small wonder, then, that critics of the BRI see great potential for what could be described as essentially imperialist coercion. As noted by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,

China has not signed onto the standards of responsible development finance agreed to by other major creditor nations and participants in multilateral banks. Among other provisions, these standards prohibit requiring collateral for development loans. By contrast, Chinese banks require collateral for roughly 60 percent of their loans to developing countries. This allows China, as a creditor, to address potential defaults on an ad hoc basis, often negotiating settlement terms that grant it further influence over the debtor’s economy or territory. Beijing prefers acting bilaterally because it can be the stronger negotiating party, dictate terms, and flout

contrast, however, because in the BRI model, China’s holds *everyone’s* debt. Economy, op. cit., p. 99.

¹²¹ See Sebastian Horn, Bradley C. Parks, Carmen M. Reinhart, & Christoph Trebesch, “China as an International Lender of Last Resort,” Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Working Paper No. 2244, March 2023, p. 1, available at https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/-ifw/Kiel_Working_Paper/2023/KWP_2244_China_as_an_International_Lender_of_Last_Resort/KWP_2244.pdf.

¹²² U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2020 Report to Congress*, 116th Congress, 2nd Session, December 2020 (hereinafter “2020 China Commission Report”), p. 97, available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf.

international norms to achieve its objectives without institutional constraints.¹²³

Many of the objectives China pursues through such means seem to be baldly exploitative in an almost classically 19th-Century sense. BRI loans, in fact, are quite clearly structured with special advantage for China in mind:

While Beijing does not attach governance and project feasibility standards to its loans as IFIs [international financial institutions] do, Chinese sovereign loans to other countries include unique provisions that protect China's existing commercial interests and ensure that China is paid before other creditors. The Center for Global Development's groundbreaking study of 100 Chinese loan contracts revealed that these loans prioritize Chinese interests by creating collateral arrangements, such as Chinese-controlled revenue accounts in which revenue from a debtor's sale of commodities is deposited into an account controlled by China and acts as collateral for the loan. The contracts also include the so-called 'No Paris Club' clauses that keep Chinese debt out of collective restructuring efforts among the Paris Club of bilateral lenders, thereby ensuring that Chinese debts are prioritized above other bilateral debts and allowing China to freeride on multilateral debt relief efforts.¹²⁴

Chinese loans are apparently also often made at what are in effect commercial – i.e., profit-seeking – interest rates,

¹²³ 2020 *China Commission Report*, op. cit., p. 98.

¹²⁴ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Report to Congress*, 117th Congress, 1st Session, November 2021 (hereinafter "*2021 China Commission Report*"), p. 84, available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf.

rather than the much lower rates more common with multilateral development aid. Coupled with the rapid fashion in which they are typically agreed, which all but precludes proper vetting and analysis, this would seem to be all but *asking* for debt trouble.¹²⁵

One of the most notorious examples of China leveraging a recipient country's extravagant and unsustainable BRI debts into a broader relationship of control, in this case of territory, can be found in the case of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota. There, Sri Lankan debts to China for construction of the port—predominantly loans from the Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank¹²⁶—piled up at such an alarming rate that by 2015, “roughly 95 percent of Sri Lanka’s government revenue was going toward servicing it.” In 2017, Sri Lanka agreed to a concession giving a Chinese company a controlling stake in the port on a 99-year lease, with Sri Lankan officials recounting that Chinese officials had insisted upon the Chinese company taking that controlling interest.¹²⁷ (By some accounts, in fact, the deal was even more concessionary than that: Sri Lanka’s Foreign Minister has said that the Chinese 99-year lease actually includes the option for a *further* 99 years—bringing the potential total period of Chinese control of the port to a staggering 198 years.¹²⁸)

¹²⁵ See, for example, Hillman, op. cit., p. 159 (discussing example of early Sri Lankan loan package).

¹²⁶ See Jorgelina Do Rosario & Rachel Savage, “Sri Lanka’s debt to China close to 20% of public external debt—study,” *Reuters*, November 30, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lankas-debt-china-close-20-public-external-debt-study-2022-11-30/>.

¹²⁷ Hillman, op. cit., pp. 155-162; see also generally He, op. cit.; Kiran Stacey, “China signs 99-year lease on Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port,” *Financial Times*, December 11, 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/e150ef0c-de37-11e7-a8a4-0a1e63a52f9c>.

¹²⁸ Catherine Wong, “China can extend Hambantota port lease to 198 years, Sri Lankan minister says,” *South China Morning Post*, February 25,

Hambantota may seem an outlier in terms of its sheer egregiousness—and the fact that it has received publicity thanks to subsequent complaints by a successor Sri Lankan government administration—but such concessions are apparently not that unusual. Tajikistan, for instance, ceded control of about 1,000 square kilometers of territory to China in 2011 in return for partial debt forgiveness. China reportedly also acquired contractual rights to access coal, ports, and land in Montenegro as collateral for a 2014 loan to that country, and Laos reportedly gave China a 25-year concession for control of its national power grid in 2021. In Kenya, the Auditor-General's office has reported that assets of the Kenya Ports Authority and Kenya Railways authority were offered as collateral for a Chinese loan to build a railway, "with a waiver of [Kenya's] sovereign immunity on the collateral."¹²⁹

Chinese loan agreements, moreover, appear to be structured in ways that quite explicitly facilitate even *broad* sorts of leverage, including for political objectives. As reported by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Chinese loan contracts also include policy change clauses that allow China to cancel a loan if the debtor country undertakes policy changes 'adverse to "any PRC entity" in the borrowing country.'" Such broad terms open the door to China pressuring recipients "to maintain positive bilateral relations with China," lest some local government action or policy choice deemed to be covered by such a clause "trigger a range of punitive measures, such as cross-defaults on other Chinese loans ... or mandatory early repayment."¹³⁰

2021, available at

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3122975/mis-take-china-can-extend-hambantota-port-lease-198-years-sri>.

¹²⁹ He, *op. cit.*

¹³⁰ 2021 *China Commission Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

Nor has China been exactly shy about using the *political* leverage that such debt relationships give it. Beijing, for instance, apparently used the cancelation of more than \$78 million in debt to persuade Cameroon to withdraw its national candidate for the position of director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), ending this competitive challenge to the *Chinese* candidate, Qu Dongyu—who duly won election to that post in 2019. Beijing also reportedly threatened “to block agricultural exports from Brazil and Uruguay” if they did not vote for Qu.¹³¹ China also used debt leverage to persuade the impoverished country of Laos to “purchase” an expensive Chinese communications satellite—funded by more Chinese loans—that it did not need, but which enabled the PRC to place this satellite in a Laos-designated orbital slot assigned by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) that would otherwise have been unavailable to China.¹³²

China also “routinely leverages regional ties as voting blocs,” relying upon African states, for instance, to support Beijing in defeating attempts to criticize China’s human rights record in international *fora*,¹³³ and BRI debt and infrastructure dependencies give it much to work with in this regard. Perhaps most dramatically, the small and poor African country of Djibouti—which has debts to China that by 2019 alone amounted to 70 percent of its GDP¹³⁴—now hosts China’s first overseas military base.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Economy, op. cit., p. 201. (The quotation comes from an article in *Le Monde*, cited by Economy.) See also *2020 China Commission Report*, op. cit., pp. 99-100 (discussing, *inter alia*, the Cameroon FAO case).

¹³² Hillman, op. cit., p. 186.

¹³³ *2020 China Commission Report*, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

¹³⁴ Hillman, op. cit., pp. 8, 51 & 178.

¹³⁵ See generally Erica Downs, Jeffrey Beckers, & Patrick deGateno, “China’s Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China’s First Overseas Base,” Center for Naval

Indeed, viewing BRI debt relationships from the perspective of the *leverage* they give the PRC—that is, as strategic tools of Chinese influence—makes these relationships make more sense than if one viewed them strictly as undertakings that should be expected to have some arguable economic rationality on their own terms. Bailouts of BRI debtors not only protect Chinese banks against widespread BRI defaults,¹³⁶ but also make recipients further dependent upon China, preserving the debtor-creditor relationship and—if anything—allowing it to stretch the leverage this gives Beijing even further into the future.¹³⁷

Naturally, China's *own* narrative of all its infrastructure investment in the Global South has been that they are benign, even benevolent: “[u]nlike those wicked imperialists of yesteryear, ran the story [of China's involvement in Africa], China was a benefactor.”¹³⁸ But of course that is exactly what those “wicked imperialists” said back in the 19th Century, too. British administrators in India, for instance, felt that they “were not only improving the economic condition of the Indians ... [but] also improving the morals of a barbaric, decadent people.”¹³⁹

Meanwhile, of course, locals simply had to endure what such projects brought them. After China established a cobalt mining relationship with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2007, for example, it quickly invested

Analyses, July 2017), available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1063680.pdf>.

¹³⁶ Yeung, *op. cit.* (quoting one study arguing that “Beijing is ultimately trying to rescue its own banks.”).

¹³⁷ See Horn et al., *op. cit.*, p. 4 (“... China has developed a system of “Bailouts on the Belt and Road” that helps recipient countries to avoid default, and continue servicing their BRI debts, at least in the short run.”).

¹³⁸ Winder, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹³⁹ Mihir Bose, “India: The civilization with no home-grown history,” in *Histories of Nations*, Peter Furtado, ed., Thames & Hudson, 2017, p. 27.

billions of dollars in setting up seven of that country's 10 largest mines and establishing domination of "the entire supply chain of this now-essential component."¹⁴⁰ By 2014, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), up to 40,000 children worked as laborers in the DRC's cobalt mines.¹⁴¹

All in all, by the 2020s it was becoming increasingly common to hear observers conclude that

[t]he entire Belt and Road Initiative, indeed, was beginning to take on worryingly old-fashioned overtones. ... This, [critics] said, was how Europe's own empires had behaved, laying railways across Africa and Asia the better to get at their minerals and markets. ... The world had seen this sort of thing before. Malaysia's President Mahathir Mohamad called it 'a new version of colonialism.'¹⁴²

China may not yet have actual "treaty ports" on the old European model, but by 2024 it was already being reported that more than a hundred "Special Economic Zones" (SEZs) had been established in various countries around the world, all of which were *administered by China's Ministry of Commerce*. These SEZs featured investment "focusing on industries associated with the China model." As a result, it was said, "host countries may find their economies becoming more Chinese."¹⁴³ This system of Chinese-administered economic zones in foreign countries was not

¹⁴⁰ Winder, op. cit., p. 276.

¹⁴¹ See The Borgen Project, "Child Labor in Cobalt Mines of the DRC," April 10, 2023, available at <https://borgenproject.org/child-labor-in-cobalt-mines/#:~:text=In%202014%2C%20the%20United%20Nations,children%20engaging%20in%20cobalt%20mining>; see also, for example, Winder, op. cit., p. 276.

¹⁴² Winder, op. cit., pp. 315-316.

¹⁴³ "Painting the globe red," *The Economist*, June 8, 2024, p. 62.

exactly like the British-administered Imperial Maritime Customs office that the Qing Dynasty had been compelled to establish by the imperialist powers in 1863 under “unequal” treaties,¹⁴⁴ but it was not entirely *unlike it* either. Here, as in so many other areas, aspects of history seem to be repeating themselves.

Resource Extraction for Metropolitan Industry

The importance China places upon resource extraction from more peripheral regions of the world is well enough known to require little elaboration here, though oil purchases from the Middle East,¹⁴⁵ mining of critical minerals in Central Africa,¹⁴⁶ and the widespread purchase of agricultural commodities¹⁴⁷ have become key features of the modern landscape of Beijing’s international relationships. Even in the early days of the CCP’s overseas development aid projects, it was common for loans to be given specifically in return for access to natural resources (“resource-credit

¹⁴⁴ Osterhammel, op. cit., p. 610.

¹⁴⁵ See generally, for example, Keith Bradsher, “China’s Economic Stake in the Middle East: Its Thirst for Oil,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2023 (“No country buys more oil from Saudi Arabia, the world’s second-largest producer behind the United States. Half of China’s oil imports, and a little more than a third of all the oil burned in China, comes from the Persian Gulf”), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/business/china-oil-saudi-arabia-iran.html#:~:text=China%20has%20also%20started%20buying,in%20trading%20Iran%27s%20oil%20exports>.

¹⁴⁶ See generally, for example, Institute for Developing Economics, “China’s Mining Footprint in Africa,” undated, available at https://www.ide.go.jp/English/Data/Africa_file/Manualreport/cia_08.html.

¹⁴⁷ See generally, for example, Center for Strategic & International Studies, “How is China Feeding its Population of 1.4 billion?,” available at <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-food-security/>.

swaps”),¹⁴⁸ and in more recent years China has demanded transfers of such resources as a part of debt service obligations by the recipients of BRI loans.

In Ecuador, for instance, when the local government was unable to service its huge debts to China on a hydroelectric project, it was compelled to promise to send 80 percent of its oil exports to China for at least five years.¹⁴⁹ For its part, Tajikistan is reported to have sold off strategic national assets in order to help manage its BRI debt, including granting silver mining rights to China and allowing a Chinese firm to acquire a stake in the country’s largest aluminum plant.¹⁵⁰ There seems little question, as one expert at the Council on Foreign Relations has put it, that “[f]rom the Chinese perspective, Africa is desirable because it wants to secure input for its manufacturing sector and, when it looks around the world, a lot of these copper, cobalt[,] or other minerals are found in Africa.”¹⁵¹ Scholars of relations between 19th Century European metropolises and their various peripheries would not find such arrangements unfamiliar.

Create and Manage Peripheral Markets

If one listens to Xi Jinping, China would seem to bestow trading relationships upon other countries almost as acts of imperial benevolence. “China,” he has declared, “will firmly share market opportunities with the rest of the world.”¹⁵² The reality of such relationships, however – in

¹⁴⁸ Hillman, op. cit., p. 185.

¹⁴⁹ Economy, op. cit., p. 101.

¹⁵⁰ 2020 *China Commission Report*, op. cit., p. 98.

¹⁵¹ Diallo, op. cit.

¹⁵² Xi Jinping, “Let the Breeze of Openness Bring Warmth to the World,” keynote speech to the opening ceremony of the Fourth China International Import Expo, November 4, 2021, in Xi Jinping, *Speeches on*

what is arguably a classically imperialist fashion—is that they tend to be profoundly asymmetrical, amounting to networks of bilateral dependency upon China.

Nor are these asymmetries merely accidental or incidental, as one might perhaps expect would often be the case in virtually any economic relationship between parties of enormously differing wealth and power. In fact, this asymmetry is quite deliberate: it is an objective of CCP policy. As the Chinese Communist Party explained in its 14th Five-Year Plan in 2021, the PRC pursues the objective of establishing a system of “dual circulation” — that is, creating

a strong domestic market and the construction of a trade powerhouse, [in order to] form a powerful gravitational field to attract global resources and factors of production ... and accelerate the cultivation of new advantages to be used in international cooperation and competition.¹⁵³

According to Xi Jinping, “domestic circulation as the mainstay and domestic and international circulations [will] reinforce each other ... making the Chinese economy more resilient and competitive.”¹⁵⁴ This will help China, he claims, enter “a new development stage,” with “a new development philosophy and ... a new development paradigm with domestic circulation as the mainstay and domestic and international circulations reinforcing each other.”¹⁵⁵

Diplomacy, Vol. 2, Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2022 (hereinafter “*Speeches on Diplomacy 2*”), p. 484.

¹⁵³ 14th FYP, op. cit.

¹⁵⁴ Xi Jinping, “Together, Let Us Fight Covid-19 and Create a Better Future,” remarks to Session One of the 15th G20 Leaders’ Summit, November 21, 2020, in *Speeches on Diplomacy 2*, op. cit., p. 369.

¹⁵⁵ Xi Jinping, “Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity’s Way Forward,” remarks to the World Economic Forum, January 25, 2021, in Xi Jinping, *Speeches on Diplomacy 2*, op. cit., p. 385.

Cutting through the jargon, this is a concept under which the CCP hopes to *minimize* China's dependence upon foreign trade (by expanding domestic demand¹⁵⁶) while still *maximizing* the dependence of the rest of the world upon Chinese manufactures.¹⁵⁷ If this "dual circulation" plan succeeds, it would ensure both that the terms of such relationships can always be managed to Beijing's advantage and—quite explicitly—it would give China leverage over its trading partners that can be used more broadly, "in international ... competition."¹⁵⁸

Creating a Co-Opted Compradore Class

This author has been unable to find much reporting or scholarship on the degree to which Chinese global economic engagement over the last generation has contributed to the development of a new compradore class of imperialist intermediaries in China's global periphery. This could be because this question has simply been overlooked by experts as yet unaccustomed to saying "Chinese" and "imperialism" in the same breath, because not enough time has yet passed since China acquired the economic power needed to drive such dynamics in diverse societies far from its shores, or because such a class of dependent peripheral elites already existed thanks to generations of European imperialism, and needs today merely to be co-opted from one metropolitan orientation to another.

¹⁵⁶ DoD 2023 *China Report*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵⁷ See generally Hillman, op. cit., at p. 4; see also *ibid.* pp. 12 & 241 (describing China as pursuing a digital version of this "dual circulation" in the realm of digital technology: "Beijing wants to warry, store, and mine more of the world's data while keeping its own networks out of reach," which would give it enormous asymmetrical advantages in the digital realm).

¹⁵⁸ 14th FYP, op. cit.

Nevertheless, even without more information about China's economic effect upon peripheral societies, it is clear that Beijing's approach to international economic policy *is* having an impact upon local corruption and governance. As Jonathan Hillman has noted, for instance, in the implementation of the BRI, "[c]orruption is a feature, not a bug."¹⁵⁹ From the perspective of local governments in China's global periphery, it is precisely part of the attraction of BRI projects—and the loans that finance them, creating the debt burdens discussed above—that they do *not* require meaningful transparency, accountability, quality control, performance metrics, feasibility studies, and environmental or social impact assessments in the ways that have become common in Western-funded development programs. Corruption is thus easy and apparently commonplace in BRI projects, with leaders in countries near the bottom of Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index" often finding Chinese aid a pleasantly—and no doubt personally profitable—"strings free" means of injecting money into the local system.¹⁶⁰

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Chinese economic engagement has often tended to be associated with enormous local corruption. In 2017, for instance, an official in Sri Lanka said that some \$500 million in loans from China had "disappeared" from local government accounts, while only a year later, the country's then-president admitted that

¹⁵⁹ Hillman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 35, 52, 55-56, 104, & 166; see also *ibid.* pp. 187-188 (describing one deal between the Chinese technology company ZTE in 2006 "that a World Bank study on corruption calls 'highly unusual'"); see also, for example, Yeung, *op. cit.* (citing a study by researchers from the World Bank, Harvard Kennedy School, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, and the U.S.-based research lab AidData that "China's loans are far more secretive, with most of its operations and transactions concealed from public view"), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/28/economy/china-rescue-lending-belt-and-road-study-intl-hnk/index.html>.

Xi Jinping had “gifted” him two billion RMB (perhaps \$30 million at the exchange rate of that time) “to be utilized for any project of [his] wish.” In 2021, South African officials also froze some \$300 million in funds linked to alleged corrupt dealings between China’s CRRC Corporation and a local South African company during former President Jacob Zuma’s years in power there.¹⁶¹ In the words of one economist in Kenya—a country which borrowed about \$5 billion to fund new railway lines, and as of 2023 was seeking to borrow more—the BRI approach “makes development very expensive ... and it also opens up room for corruption.”¹⁶² In fact, as William He has summarized, “[t]here is good reason to suspect that all BRI-related projects involve some form of bribery.”¹⁶³

Such Chinese economic penetration of peripheral economies and corruption of local elites, moreover, is sure to have powerful spin-off effects in ensuring that Beijing can call upon such elites to do its bidding if CCP officials feel their interests to be threatened or the achievement of their objectives to be in jeopardy. It was former Estonian President Toomas Ilves who coined the term *Schröderizatsia* to describe what Mark Galeotti has described as “the individual-by-individual corruption of another country’s politics.”¹⁶⁴ But although the idea of “Schroederization” may have originated with Vladimir Putin’s buying the loyalty of former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder by hiring him to a lucrative position with the Russian gas company Gazprom, it can surely also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to much of China’s dealings with the Global South today. And here we might seem to find yet another echo of

¹⁶¹ He, op. cit.

¹⁶² Diallo, op. cit. (quoting economist Victor Kimosop).

¹⁶³ He, op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponization of Everything*, Yale University Press, 2022, p. 92.

the coercive asymmetric economics of 19th Century imperialism.

Feelings of Civilizational Superiority

In light of what we have seen about the civilizational arrogance and racism of European imperialists in the 19th Century, it is worth emphasizing the degree to which Chinese leaders—including, and perhaps especially, Xi Jinping himself—have in recent years increasingly emphasized the claim that there is something special, superior, and even *transcendent* about traditional Chinese culture that gives Beijing a special role to play in shaping and guiding the future of humanity. Xi has said, for instance, that “[t]raditional Chinese culture is deeply etched onto the DNA of the Chinese people. Our superior culture has provided nutrient for the renaissance of the Chinese nation. It can be considered ‘the calcium of the spirit.’”¹⁶⁵

Such thinking seems to owe much to what has come to be known as *tianxia* (“All Under Heaven”) theory—a modern concept, often associated with Chinese scholars such as Zhao Tingyang, which draws upon ancient Chinese imperial conceits of Sinocentric global order and asserts China’s special and unique role as a “knowledge superpower” that draws upon its “resources of traditional thought” to “create new world concepts and new world structures” based on ostensibly Confucian ideas of social harmony.¹⁶⁶ The CCP’s claims to be creating a “harmonious

¹⁶⁵ Quoted by Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “The Agenda of Xi Jinping: Is the Chinese Communist Party capable of thorough reforms?” in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, Willy Wo-Lap Lam, ed., Routledge, 2018, p. 8.

¹⁶⁶ William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 209 (quoting and citing Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* [The Tianxia system: A philosophy for the World Institution] Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005, pp. 2, 3, 40,

society” in China draw upon such wellsprings—if perhaps more clearly as rationalization than as description—as do assertions by PRC officials of their country’s special role in leading the way to a “harmonious world” more generally.¹⁶⁷

No lesser officials than Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao¹⁶⁸ and President Hu Jintao¹⁶⁹ have described China as working to build a “harmonious world.” Though Xi Jinping is today more likely to use his own phrasing—such as in describing his vision of China leading the development of a “community of common destiny” or a “community with a shared future for mankind”¹⁷⁰—it seems clear that the idea remains unchanged.

These concepts draw upon traditional Confucian-inflected Chinese ideals of harmony, in which all actors in a social system understand their place and role in that system and stick with diligent fidelity to the roles, expectations, and rituals thereof.¹⁷¹ They are also buttressed, however, by cybernetics-influenced CCP concepts of social engineering—in which the economic, political, ideological subsystems of society need to be “harmonized”¹⁷² under

108; and Zhao Tingyang, “All Under Heaven,” in Hagt, “Debating China’s Future,” *China Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2008, p. 15).

¹⁶⁷ See generally Gilbert Rozman, “Chinese National Identity: A Six-Dimensional Analysis,” in *East Asian National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism*, Gilbert Rozman, ed., Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012, pp. 73, 79-80, & 92-93; Jin Linbo, “China’s National Identity and Foreign Policy: Continuity amid Transformation,” Rozman, ed., op. cit., p. 242 (discussing “harmonious world” thinking).

¹⁶⁸ Zheng Wang, op. cit., p. 239 (quoting Wen Jiabao in 2009).

¹⁶⁹ Larson & Shevchenko, op. cit., p. 195 (quoting Hu Jintao from 2005).

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in DoD 2023 *China Report*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁷¹ See generally Christopher A. Ford, *The Mind of Empire: China’s History and Modern Foreign Relations*, University Press of Kentucky, 2010, pp. 29-38.

¹⁷² The term *bei hexie*, “to be harmonized” is used by dissidents in China to refer to “a form of virtual erasure” for having displeased authorities. See Jianying Zha, “China’s Bizarre Program to Keep Activists in Check,” *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2018, available at

some form of centralized control architecture in order to function effectively¹⁷³—as well as Leninist theory and the ancient Chinese philosophy of Legalism.¹⁷⁴ The resulting theory of social control may be something of a bricolage, but it is sharply hierarchic, fundamentally authoritarian, and profoundly Sinocentric, ultimately aspiring—in theory, at least—to scale some loose analogue of China’s own supposedly “harmonious” domestic order onto a broader world stage.¹⁷⁵

In that sense, therefore, in concept and in spirit, the CCP’s narrative of civilizational dominance is even *more* hegemonically imperialist than the racial and civilizational tropes of 19th Century European powers in imperialism’s heyday. After all, there were *multiple* European imperialist powers competing with each other, and no single one of them seems quite to have imagined that *its* particularist civilization would lead a “community of common destiny” for all mankind. Not since the Roman Empire of the late Christian emperors, and leaving aside the short-lived reign of Napoleon, has Europe seen an imperial ideology as

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/chinas-bizarre-program-to-keep-activists-in-check>.

¹⁷³ Josh Chin & Liza Lin, *Surveillance State: Inside China’s Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control*, St. Martin’s Press, 2022, p. 81 (citing articles by the eminent PRC scientist Qian Xuesen in a journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the *Chinese Journal of Nature*).

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Ford, “Xi Jinping, Michel Foucault, and Spy Balloons?”, op. cit., p. 6 (also citing Yuri Pines, “Legalism in Chinese Philosophy,” Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman eds., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-legalism/>).

¹⁷⁵ See Ford, “China’s Strategic Vision: Part Three,” *supra*, at 14-15; Ford, *China Looks at the West*, *supra*, at 299-325, 455-60, 477-78; Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China’s Surveillance State*, Harper Collins, 2018, p. 1 (“Within its borders, China is working to create the perfect surveillance state, and its engineers of the soul are again trying to craft the ‘new man’ of whom Lenin, Stalin, and Mao once dreamed. And this China wants to shape the rest of the world in its own image.”).

fundamentally monist as that which would appear to lie behind PRC imaginings of a China-led “harmonious world” and “community with a shared future for mankind.”

By way of further comparison with European imperialist precedents, it is also worth pointing out the degree to which this modern PRC worldview is remarkably racist. Encouraged by government-sponsored pseudo-scholarship making claims such as that Chinese culture has remained pure and unchanged for “5,000 years”¹⁷⁶ and that ethnic Chinese are the only one of the world’s peoples *not* to have suffered the indignity of originating in Africa,¹⁷⁷ the CCP’s modern racializing myths

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, Luka de Boni, “China’s Five-Thousand Year History: Myth or Reality?” *European Guanxi*, January 17, 2022 (“China claims to have five thousand years of continuous history. Historians tend to reject this claim ... but the PRC has consistently used this claim to boost domestic patriotism. The ‘5000 years’ claim signals that there is something special about Chinese civilization, and thus about Chinese identity, that demarks it from the rest of the world. Over five thousand years, the world has changed, civilizations and dynasties have come and gone, but the Chinese people have remained. Through this claim, then, the PRC can stimulate a sense of national pride. In addition, by referring to China’s continuous history, it can present itself as the legitimate incarnation of a thousands years old civilization.”), available at <https://www.europeanguanxi.com/post/china-s-five-thousand-year-history-myth-or-reality>.

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, Jake Lee-Howarth, “Peking Man and China’s Paleontological Nationalism,” *Ancient Origins*, May 20, 2022 (“The People’s Republic of China have employed the Peking man as the star of their national evolutionary theory, arguing that the first human originated in China rather than Africa. This was a bid to convince the world that the Chinese were the Earth’s most original modern human habitants. ... In 1963, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai encouraged Chinese academics to ‘reassess the things unearthed, many ancient relics and documents from the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint and clarify history.’ The objective was that ‘in this way, it will be possible to break down many fetishes and superstitions [and] strengthen national dignity and patriotism.’ An explosion in patriotism in the 1990s further propelled Peking man and other archaeological discoveries into the national spotlight, and from the middle of the decade the Peking man was

feed a resurrected meta-myth that the Chinese are—and have been since prehistoric times—a homogenous people, the *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nationality). The myth of homogeneity purports a common ancestry for China's ethnic groups and a racial link between Chinese and other East Asians, while postulating sharp biological and cultural distinctions between Chinese and other peoples. Component myths of descent from the dragon, the Yellow Emperor, Peking Man, and the Great Wall's builders contribute to imagining China as an organic entity and bolster a 'Great Han chauvinism' (*da hanzu zhuyi*) that has implications for China's external behavior. ... PRC leaders are explicit in their belief in a biologized ethnicity. Ismail Amat, head of China's State Ethnic Affairs Commission, has stated that, in contrast to a sentimental attachment to the state, 'nationality is more a matter of blood ties and race.' Other leaders conceive a racial hierarchy with an unequal distribution of essentializing attributes. Tian Jiyun, National People's Congress (NPC) vice chair and a leading reformer, told an NPC meeting in 1995 that 'the IQs of the Chinese ethnic group, the descendants of the Yellow Emperor, are very high, comparatively speaking' (*zhonghua minzu*,

reserved as a major topic in Chinese textbooks. In 1998 the Chinese government went further and launched a sweeping archaeological survey called the *Study of Evolution of Early Hominid and the Related Environmental Background*, in an attempt to create a complete fossil series that would rival proponents of the Out of Africa theory."'), available at <https://www.ancient-origins.net/human-origins-science/peking-man-0016787>.

yanhuang zisun, zhishang dou shi hen gaode, dang
bijiao er yan).¹⁷⁸

As scholars such as Frank Dikotter have documented, Chinese thinkers throughout the 20th Century have continued to think of people from around the world according to their supposed biological features in ways that would not be unfamiliar to 19th Century Europeans. As Dikotter recounts, in CCP-ruled China, official thinking holds that the people of China are defined by having a common *biological* ancestor, popular attitudes remained profoundly racist and new eugenics laws were actually *enacted* in the 1980s and 1990s, and “[a]ttitudes have not improved in the twenty-first century.”¹⁷⁹ Anti-Black racism remains powerful and pervasive in China today,¹⁸⁰ and it would indeed appear that the PRC’s officially racialized conception of the valorized Chinese “self” has produced as its side effect a view of all *other* racial groups as inherently inferior, albeit to differing degrees.¹⁸¹ With increasingly

¹⁷⁸ Barry Sautman, “Racial Nationalism and China’s External Behavior,” *World Affairs*, Vol. 160, No. 2, Fall 1997, p. 79, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672513>.

¹⁷⁹ Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 127-134, available at <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/the-discourse-of-race-in-modern-china/>.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Bonnie Girard, “Racism Is Alive and Well in China,” *The Diplomat*, April 23, 2020, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/racism-is-alive-and-well-in-china/>; Yaqiu Wang, “From Covid to Blackface on TV, China’s Racism Problem Runs Deep,” Human Rights Watch, February 18, 2021, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/covid-blackface-tv-chinas-racism-problem-runs-deep>.

¹⁸¹ See generally, for example, Zhiqiu Benson Zhou, “Patriarchal racism: the convergence of anti-blackness and gender tension on Chinese social media,” *Information, Communication & Society*, March 23, 2023 (discussing the idea that in Chinese social media there are “multiple triangulations” in popular Chinese thinking about interracial relationships between black women and Chinese men, black men and

vicious xenophobic narratives being permitted wide circulation in China's otherwise heavily-censored information space – narratives that include disinformation about the United States and Japan, as well as “hate speech toward Japanese, Americans, Jews and Africans, as well as Chinese who are critical of the government” – and arguably contributing even to real-world incidents of violence against non-Chinese persons in China,¹⁸² it is not hard to see modern China racist and chauvinist in much the same way as the 19th Century European imperialists.

Claims of Proprietary Interests in Metropole's “Own” People Everywhere

Officials in Beijing already have a remarkably strong sense of proprietary interest when it comes to the affairs of persons of ethnic Chinese descent living abroad, even when these people are citizens of foreign countries, and whether or not they have any actual connection to China at all. There are an estimated 60 million ethnically Chinese persons living outside of China, and Chinese officials regard *all* of them as essentially “belonging” to the CCP Party-State.

China does not recognize dual citizenship; as a consequence, an estimated 80 per cent of all ethnic Chinese living outside China are nationals of other

Chinese women, white women and Chinese men, and white men and Chinese women), available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2193252>.

¹⁸² See generally, for example, Li Yuan, “Is Xenophobia on Chinese Social Media Teaching Real-World Hate?” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/04/business/china-hate-speech-xenophobia.html>. See also, “Another attack on a Japanese local points to a big problem in China,” *The Economist*, September 26, 2024, available at <https://www.economist.com/china/2024/09/26/another-attack-on-a-japanese-local-points-to-a-big-problem-in-china>.

states. Nevertheless, Beijing counts them as part of the 'Chinese nation': The politically most common Chinese term for overseas Chinese (*huaqiaohuaren*) includes both Chinese citizens abroad (*huaqiao*) and ethnic Chinese with non-Chinese nationalities (*huaren*). Xi Jinping calls them all 'members of the great Chinese family' who would 'never forget their homeland China' and 'never deny the blood of the Chinese nation in their bodies'. ...

In other words, Beijing defines membership of the Chinese nation not in legal terms, but primarily in ethnic and racial terms; accordingly, *all* overseas Chinese are considered part of the People's Republic of China – no matter what passport they hold or how many generations their families have lived abroad. In line with this, Chinese diaspora policy, according to one cadre textbook, is directed not only at 'Chinese citizens abroad, but also ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship'. ... '[A]ncestry' and 'race' are regarded as central markers of belonging when it comes to assigning people of Chinese origin in [other countries].¹⁸³

This race-essentialist imperial attitude of "all ethnic Chinese in the world are my subjects" already manifests itself in ways that are alternatively oddly amusing and downright sinister. During the lead-up to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, for example, the PRC went to

¹⁸³ Carsten Schäfer, "China's Diaspora Policy under Xi Jinping: Content, limits and challenges," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Research Paper 2022/RP 10, November 9, 2022 (citing Xi Jinping, *Tan zhiguolizheng* [The Governance of China], Foreign Language Press, 2014, p. 63f; Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO), *Qiaowu gongzuo gailun* [Outline of Overseas Chinese Work] *Zhongguo zhigongdang chubanshe*, 2006, p. 2), available at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022RP10/>.

enormous trouble to recruit cadres of ethnically Chinese athletes in foreign countries upon whose talents it could draw in helping China win more medals. It did not matter that these athletes were citizens of countries such as the United States, Canada, or the Russian Federation – countries with strong winter sporting traditions – or whether these young people spoke Chinese, understood the first thing about Chinese culture or society, or had ever even been to the country before.¹⁸⁴ If they were *ethnically* Chinese, they could represent “their” Communist “Motherland” and add to its glory at the Olympics. Some 32 foreign-born athletes – including 15 out of China’s 24 ice hockey players, and the famous American skier Eileen Gu¹⁸⁵ – competed in the Games for the PRC.

On the more sinister side, these feelings of proprietary interest in all persons overseas who happen to share some degree of Chinese descent, however distant, seems also to have shaded over into an assumption that such co-ethnics *owe obedience* to CCP leaders in Beijing. Since the late 20th Century, CCP officials have worked to propagandize and manipulate the Chinese diaspora, “reeducating it according to both the glory of Chinese civilization and tragedy of China’s modern history,” with “new and old populations of overseas Chinese ... again being recruited into the narrative

¹⁸⁴ Vicky Lin, “Chinese Nationalism at the Winter Olympics,” *Foreign Affairs Review*, June 16, 2022, available at <https://jhufar.com/2022/06/16/chinese-nationalism-at-the-winter-olympics/>.

¹⁸⁵ See Susan Brownell, “Citizenship Swapping at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, March 25, 2022, available at <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/03/25/citizenship-swapping-at-the-beijing-2022-winter-olympics%E2%82%AC%80%20BC/>; Justin Olsvik, “China Recruited Canadians to Avoid Embarrassment on the Olympic Ice,” *The Diplomat*, February 2, 2022, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/china-recruited-canadians-to-avoid-embarrassment-on-olympic-ice/>.

of national humiliation as patriotic ‘sons of the Yellow Emperor’ who form ‘a part of China’s history that is splattered with blood and tears.’”¹⁸⁶ According to Xi Jinping himself, in fact,

We will maintain extensive contacts with overseas Chinese nationals, returned Chinese and their relatives[,] and unite them so that they can join our endeavors to revitalize the Chinese nation. ... We must ... strengthen the great unity of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups and the great unity of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation at home and abroad.¹⁸⁷

Disturbingly, even while PRC diplomats cynically tell Western audiences that it is racist—or part of a broader Western phenomenon of “Asian hate”¹⁸⁸—to worry about the implications of the ideas of race loyalty that CCP leaders proclaim, it has been well understood for years that Chinese intelligence operatives abroad both expect and pressure foreign members of China’s enormous worldwide ethnic

¹⁸⁶ Callahan, op. cit., p. 147 (quoting Ren Guixiang and Zhou Hongying, *Huaqiao Huaren yu guogong guanxi* [Overseas Chinese and Nationalist Party-Communist Party Relations], *Wuhan daxue chubanshe*, 1999, pp. 380-381).

¹⁸⁷ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” remarks on October 18, 2017, to the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, *Xinhua News Agency*, November 4, 2017, available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thccpnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Chinese Ambassador to the US Qin Gang Takes an Exclusive Interview with Al-Jazeera English Channel’s ‘The Bottom Line,’” August 19, 2022, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbdt_665378/202208/t20220819_10745623.html.

diaspora to engage in espionage¹⁸⁹ or influence operations¹⁹⁰ on behalf of the PRC.

And where such co-ethnics and émigré Chinese living abroad refuse to toe the line, the CCP Party-State has increasingly turned to coercive methods to control them. Unhappy with his sale of CCP-disfavored reading materials in Hong Kong, for instance, Chinese intelligence agents abducted the Swedish citizen Gui Minhai while he was vacationing in Thailand in 2015, thereafter holding him in political detention.¹⁹¹ The PRC has also established over a hundred regional “police stations” in at least 53 countries worldwide—including Canada, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States—which “serve as vehicles for ‘transnational repression,’ including pressuring individuals targeted by the government to return to China and targeting dissidents.”¹⁹² Chinese police officers have

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Nicholas Eftimiades, *Chinese Espionage Operations and Tactics*, Vitruvian, 2020, p. 2 (noting that U.S. law enforcement records of 595 legal documents counterintelligence prosecutions show that more than 90 of these cases involve ethnic Chinese).

¹⁹⁰ In 2023, for instance, a Canadian lawmaker of Chinese descent announced that PRC officials had been harassing his family in Hong Kong over comments the legislator had made that were critical of the PRC. See Leyland Cecco, “Canadian Lawmaker says China Targeted his Family for Harassment,” *The Guardian*, May 3, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/03/michael-chong-justin-trudeau-harassment-canada-china>; Leyland Cecco, “Canada Summons Chinese Ambassador after MP and His Family Harassed,” *The Guardian*, May 4, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/04/canada-china-ambassador-summoned-cong-peiwu>.

¹⁹¹ “China confirms Swedish citizen and HK bookseller in detention,” *Reuters*, February 6, 2018, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-hongkong-sweden-idUSKBN1FQ0VY/>.

¹⁹² Kenji Asada, Yukio Tajima, & Soma Kawakami, “China’s 100-plus ‘secret police stations’ span from NY to Tokyo,” *Nikkei Asia*, June 6, 2023, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-s-100-plus-secret-police-stations-span-from-NY-to>

also been reported to patrol openly, in joint operations with local forces, in areas of Croatia frequented by large numbers of Chinese tourists—allegedly, of course, as a way to provide better “services” to such travelers.¹⁹³

Modern China, therefore, does not yet have an equivalent to the Ottoman “Capitulations” or the treaty-negotiated provisions that helped establish European extraterritoriality in the Ottoman Empire and Qing Dynasty China, and it certainly has not yet displayed the bellicose “protective” spirit evidenced by 19th Century France and Russia toward co-religionists in the Holy Land. All the ingredients of such imperialist extravagances, however, would seem to be in place.

It is already true that CCP policy toward the worldwide Chinese diaspora “includes the promise to protect the interests of overseas Chinese,” and that “people of Chinese origin are expected to represent Chinese interests in influential political positions abroad.”¹⁹⁴ (Chinese diplomats, for instance, encourage mainland Chinese students at Western universities lobby their administrators—e.g., through Chinese Students and Scholars Associations [CSSAs]—for things the PRC wishes the universities to do, and even to *brawl* with students there who have the temerity to protest PRC policies.¹⁹⁵) More generally,

Tokyo; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Two Arrested for Operating Illegal Overseas Police Station of the Chinese Government,” April 17, 2023, available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-arrested-operating-illegal-overseas-police-station-chinese-government>.

¹⁹³ See, for example, “Chinese police operating in other countries is nothing new,” *Thai PBS World*, November 13, 2023, available at <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/chinese-police-operating-in-other-countries-is-nothing-new/>.

¹⁹⁴ Schäfer, op. cit.

¹⁹⁵ “The new red scare,” *The Economist*, January 4, 2020, pp. 15-16.

Xi Jinping views overseas Chinese as playing an ‘irreplaceable role’ in China’s rise as a world power. / ... Beijing also expects people of Chinese origin in [any given country] to deepen relations between China and [that country]. But not only that: As ‘unofficial ambassadors’, they are also expected to spread China’s narratives to the German public, defend China’s ‘core interests’, and help with the transfer of knowledge and technology to China.¹⁹⁶

As one account recently summarized, it is increasingly the case that

China is demanding acts of loyalty from its young professionals living and working in the U.S., sometimes putting them at odds with local law and immigration requirements, as it seeks more control over expatriates China’s orders have been imposed on its party members all over the world.¹⁹⁷

All that is now lacking is a power differential, between China and other states, that is of sufficient magnitude to permit such imperialist CCP instincts to be indulged, and such demands to be enforced.

Gunboat Diplomacy

China does not yet enjoy the extraordinary, technologically-facilitated military superiority over its emergent imperial periphery that the Europeans enjoyed back when Hillaire Belloc could write doggerel about the power of the Maxim

¹⁹⁶ Schäfer, op. cit.

¹⁹⁷ “China exerts new control over its young expats in the U.S.,” *Financial Times*, July 3, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/43ccc5be-29a6-45c0-b4be-547937cae946>.

gun to tame native rebellions. Yet it *does* have an extremely powerful military in the form of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and is working hard to make that military steadily more powerful still¹⁹⁸—including through a growing fleet of aircraft carriers perfectly suited to global power projection against weaker powers.¹⁹⁹

On this trajectory, it is thus not at all hard to imagine that a mid-21st Century China might feel the need—and see the opportunity—to intervene with its growing array of global power-projection forces in classic “gunboat diplomacy” fashion in order to protect commercial interests, financial investments, or access to resources overseas. Already, in fact,

Beijing recognizes the importance of increasing military capabilities to achieve global security objectives and has encouraged the PLA to increase its operations beyond the Indo-Pacific. China's 2015 and 2019 defense white papers claim that Beijing is primarily interested in developing these capabilities to protect PRC maritime rights and commercial interests. ... As the PRC's economic interests expand in areas like Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East, we expect to see increased focus on expanding power projection operations globally.²⁰⁰

Chinese officials have also begun to speak more, in recent years, about the possibility that Beijing will need to ensure access to overseas ports for peacekeeping and

¹⁹⁸ For a detailed description of the PRC's buildup, see DoD 2023 *China Report*, op. cit.

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Takahashe Kosuke, “China's 3rd Aircraft Carrier, the Fujian, Begins Its Maiden Sea Trial,” *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2024, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/chinas-3rd-aircraft-carrier-the-fujian-begins-its-maiden-sea-trial/>.

²⁰⁰ DoD 2023 *China Report*, op. cit.

disaster-relief operations. And PLA vessels have already sporadically undertaken port visits to countries heavily indebted to China.²⁰¹

Though CCP leaders in Beijing have claimed that “[n]o matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion,” and that it is not in China’s “DNA” to colonize others,²⁰² moreover, the country *does* actually have important historical precedents for something quite akin to “gunboat diplomacy.” The Chinese admiral Zheng He – in fact a Muslim eunuch, in the service of the Ming Dynasty – undertook a remarkable series of naval voyages at the dawn of the 15th Century, ranging around the seas of Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean to the eastern coast of Africa. As this author has recounted elsewhere,

According to contemporary records, there wasn’t anything congenially ‘win-win’ about Zheng He at all. His famous voyages, in fact, seem to have been primarily dedicated to overawing other states with China’s military might and civilizational strength, demanding that they demonstrate their deference and subservience to China. When states sometimes tried to assert their independence and autonomy by refusing to kowtow to China, in fact, Zheng He acted *very much* the imperialist.

Zheng He’s forces, for instance, invaded Sri Lanka to capture a local ruler who had offended China, bringing that man back to the Ming Court in chains. (Adding arrogant cultural and religious insult to this injury, his forces also stole a famous Buddhist relic and took it to China as booty. It was

²⁰¹ See Hillman, op. cit., p. 164 (describing the visit to Sri Lanka in 2014 by two PLA Navy submarines and a warship).

²⁰² Ibid. p. 35 (quoting Xi Jinping’s remarks to the CCP Party Congress in 2017, and other officials).

not returned until the 20th Century.) The Chinese admiral also intervened in a civil war in northern Sumatra in support of a local chieftain sympathetic to the Ming against one who wasn't, also establishing a Chinese colony there.²⁰³

While it is too soon to recount the history of 21st Century Chinese gunboat diplomacy, therefore, it could be that the world does not have long to wait.

²⁰³ Christopher A. Ford, "Zheng He Meets Dong Feng: Technologies of Hegemony in Southeast Asia," remarks at the U.S.-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue in Manila, Philippines, December 1, 2022 (citing Tansen Sen, "Zheng He's Military Interventions in South Asia, 1405-1433," *China and Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2019, p. 158, available at https://brill.com/view/journals/cahs/1/2/article-p158_158.xml; Kapila Bandara, "Chinese sailor Zheng He's Lanka voyages far from friendly," *Sunday Times*, October 5, 2014 [Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry reprint of original article], available at <https://mfa.gov.lk/chinese-sailor-zheng-hes-lanka-voyages-far-from-friendly/>; and James Carter, "The last voyage of famed Chinese admiral Zheng He," *The China Project*, January 19, 2022, available at <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/01/19/the-last-voyage-of-famed-chinese-admiral-zheng-he/>), available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/zheng-he-meets-dong-feng-technologies-of-hegemony-in-southeast-asia>). For still more on Zheng He, see Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*, Pearson Longman, 2007.

Conclusion

The reader can now see that there are a disturbingly large number of parallels between China's efforts to craft an increasingly Sinocentric regional and indeed global order in the 21st Century and the history of 19th and 20th Century European imperialism—and, in particular, the “neo-imperialism” of systematic political and economic coercion, rather than the “high imperialism” of outright direct colonial rule. These parallels may not concern officials in Beijing keen to orchestrate their country's “national rejuvenation” through a “return” to first-rank global status, but they should be disturbing indeed for leaders in the Global South—and in particular, for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which claims to support all who are oppressed “foreign occupation and domination” and urges respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, and security of all states.²⁰⁴

Many world leaders, and not just in the Global South but in the United States itself as well, were long willing to take the blandishments of Chinese diplomats at face value, and managed to persuade themselves that China's rise did *not* herald a new development threatening to the sovereign autonomy of other national peoples. Several U.S. presidential administrations, in fact, believed that it was in our interest actually to *support* China's growth and modernization.²⁰⁵ They assumed that such support would

²⁰⁴ See “What is the Nonaligned Movement?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 23, 2012, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/nonalignment-movement-explainer/24685623.html>.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, National Security Strategy of the United States, January 1988, p. 31 (arguing that “a strong, secure, and modernizing China is in our interest” because “we share a common perception of the requirement for stability”), available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1988.pdf?ver=uXpmo-mT0TKzq2Ut6PmfjA%3d%3d>.

help China “regain the path of economic reform and political liberalization,”²⁰⁶ and that the more we helped it become wealthy and powerful, the more this would “facilitate China’s development of a more open, market economy that accepts international trade practices”²⁰⁷ and ensure “China’s integration into the international system of rules and norms.”²⁰⁸ Even long after the CCP’s massacre of students and workers on Tiananmen Square in 1989, an entire generation of U.S. leaders still believed that China could be enticed to act as a “responsible stakeholder,” in the international system, becoming a country “that is peaceful and prosperous and that cooperates with us to address common challenges and mutual interests.”²⁰⁹

Unfortunately, the analysis in this paper—what this author submits conclusively demonstrates a parallelism between modern Chinese engagement with the developing world and earlier patterns of imperialist domination by European powers—gives the lie to such sanguine assumptions. It is not merely that with its growing power and economic weight, China *happens* to have acquired the self-confidence to throw aside the strategic caution of Deng Xiaoping’s “hide-and-bide” strategy and begin “acting out” in increasingly problematic but fundamentally

²⁰⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States*, March 1990, p. 12, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1990.pdf?ver=x5cwOOez0oak2BjhXekM-Q%3d%3d>.

²⁰⁷ *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, February 1994, p. 24, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=YPdbuschbfpPz3tyQQxaLg%3d%3d>.

²⁰⁸ *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, May 1997, Part II & III, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1997.pdf?ver=2whGiEUYiceAyme45GiJzA%3d%3d>.

²⁰⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, Part VIII(c)(7), available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>.

opportunistic ways.²¹⁰ Rather, this result seems to have been remarkably deliberate, the result of clear PRC policy and strategy. In this context, it is the *entire pattern* of China's engagement with the non-Chinese world, and especially with less developed countries, that is particularly significant and sinister.

The CCP's vision of China in the world is nothing if not scrupulously self-conscious. This vision is fixated upon the Party's assumed role in bringing about China's return to glory after long years in which the country was held back from its geopolitical destiny precisely by the unfavorable terms of its fateful encounter—beginning with the Opium War in 1839—with the globe-spanning imperialism of European powers empowered and emboldened by the first Industrial Revolution. Chinese nationalist thinking is thick with historical comparisons between the evils of the imperialism felt to have been inflicted upon China a “Century of Humiliation,” and China's own pending (and much deserved) “national rejuvenation”—the achievement of which the CCP has made a central plank of its domestic political legitimacy narrative.

The casual observer elsewhere in the world might assume that these contrasts within Chinese discourse revolve around the juxtaposition of the injustices of imperialism with China's rights and honor as a sovereign nation. This, however, might well be a great misunderstanding. In fact, the central juxtaposition in modern Chinese thinking may *not* be between the sovereignty of national peoples and the oppression of national-civilizational hegemonism of which European

²¹⁰ This is a problem about which this author publicly warned as early as 2007, though there is no joy in having been proved right. See Christopher A. Ford, “Past as Prism: China and the Shock of Plural Sovereignty,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 47, 4th Quarter 2007, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA521057.pdf>.

imperialism was merely one historical instance. It may, rather, be merely an assumed contrast between *European* civilizational arrogance and domination, on the one hand, and *Chinese* civilizational arrogance and domination on the other, on the other—with the former seen as being as axiomatically *reprehensible* as the latter assumed to be axiomatically natural and *desirable*. The problem for the PRC may be, in other words, less that the Europeans were imperialists than that the imperialists were *Europeans*, rather than Chinese.

Through this prism, the rest of the world needs to take seriously the distinct possibility that the imperialist character of contemporary China's foreign policy is not merely coincidental, but *intentional*. We may see here, in fact, a *mimetic imperialism*. In other words, it may be that China seeks to establish relationships vis-à-vis the rest of the world analogous to those built generations ago by the European powers, not merely because such relationships bring China power and profit, but also because China feels it cannot claim to have triumphed over its own past "humiliation" without achieving an imperialist domination of its own—that is, by being able to lord it over others in the way China resented others lording it over China in the 19th Century.

The many resemblances detailed in this paper, one might thus suspect, are less "bug" than "feature." They may be exactly the *point*. What better "method to avenge humiliation" (*xuechi tiaoyue*)²¹¹ could there be?

When one reads of a Chinese company being given a 99-year lease on the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, for example, it may be wrong to see the specific terms of this deal as a mere curiosity. Rather, it may make more sense to

²¹¹ The phrase comes from the daily diary entries made by China's Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek (Jiang Jieshi) (1887-1975), reminding himself of the importance of restoring China's power and dignity. Zheng Wang, op. cit., pp. 80-82.

see them in light of the long sweep of history as it is seen from Beijing – where officials painfully remember their own mistreatment at European hands in the 19th Century, which included the Qing Dynasty being browbeaten into leasing the New Territories of Hong Kong to the British for a term of 99 years.²¹²

Nor can one forget—or imagine that Chinese nationalists fail to see—another grim parallel: the role of narcotrafficking in the grand narrative of China’s “Century of Humiliation” and Britain’s ascendancy. Opium was already well established in the Chinese market before British traders from the East India Company first began supplying it, but the Company was able to provide a strain from India that was particularly appealing to Chinese consumers.²¹³ Fatefully, it turned out that opium was “one of the most empire-friendly commodities circulating in the global economy” of the 19th Century.²¹⁴ As the British role in the Chinese opium market grew, tensions rose with it—ultimately, of course, resulting in the Opium War of 1839–42, after Chinese officials demanded that the British destroy their opium stocks at Canton.

It is hard to overstate how large that conflict looms in nationalist Chinese imaginings and feelings of grievance. In Stephen Platt’s characterization,

the symbolic power of the Opium War is almost limitless. It has long stood as the point when China’s weakness was laid bare before the world, the opening of a ‘Century of Humiliation’ in which

²¹² See, for example, Stephen Vines, “A lease no one thought would run out,” *The Independent*, January 3, 1997, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/a-lease-no-one-thought-would-run-out-1281384.html>.

²¹³ See Platt, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–228.

²¹⁴ James L. Hevia, “Review: Opium, Empire, and Modern History,” *China Review International*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Fall 2003, p. 307, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23732550?seq=1>.

Western (and later Japanese) predators would make war on China to bully it into granting territorial concessions and trading rights. It marked a sea change in relations with the West – the end of one era, when foreigners came to China as supplicants, and the dawn of another, when they would come as conquerors. ... The shocking grounds of the war have provide the very foundation of modern Chinese nationalism ... [and] the Opium War has stood for the essence of everything modern China has tried to leave behind: weakness, victimhood, shame. ... The memory of that lost era [of Chinese greatness before the Opium War] looms ever larger in China today, as a reminder of its potential (some would say rightful) place in the world, a nostalgic vision of what it could be once again.²¹⁵

Significantly, with this nationalist memory of the Opium War as the starting gun for China's "Century of Humiliation" also comes a painful memory of the drug opium itself.

It has long been axiomatic among historians of late imperial and early Republican China that opium was a plague on the Chinese people – sapping their willpower and stamina, weakening the military, draining the Qing treasury while padding the coffers of the colonial Indian government, and reinforcing China's international image as an empire in decline. ... By the turn of the twentieth century, opium was perceived as having caused widespread social dysfunction, and the drug served as a powerful metaphor for China's

²¹⁵ Platt, *op. cit.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

political somnambulism in the age of Western imperialism.²¹⁶

Over the years, Chinese government propagandists have transform[ed] [the Opium War] into its current incarnation as the bedrock of Chinese nationalism—the war in which the British forced opium down China’s throat, the shattering start to China’s century of victimhood, the fuel of vengeance for building a new Chinese future in the face of Western imperialism, year Zero of the modern age.²¹⁷

With all of this history of nationalist grievance in mind, then, it is hard not to see parallels in present-day events as an increasingly aggressive, imperialist PRC seeks to assert its own “national rejuvenation” and finally to have turned the tables against the Western imperialists. In this context, it may not be entirely coincidental that China today exports enormous quantities of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals—as well as even newer synthetic opioids such as nitazines²¹⁸—that have produced an enormous public health crisis in the United States, with overdose deaths from such drugs having skyrocketed to 71,000 in 2021, some 22 *times* the rate in 2013.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Joyce, Madancy, “Unearthing Popular Attitudes toward the Opium Trade and Opium Suppression in Late Qing and Early Republican Fujian,” *Modern China*, Vol. 27, No. 4, October 2001, p. 436, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181326?seq=1>.

²¹⁷ Platt, op. cit., p. 447.

²¹⁸ U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, Washington D.C. Public Information Office, “New, Dangerous Synthetic Opioid in D.C., Emerging in Tri-State Area,” June 1, 2022, available at <https://www.dea.gov/stories/2022/2022-06/2022-06-01/new-dangerous-synthetic-opioid-dc-emerging-tri-state-area>.

²¹⁹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control, “Fentanyl,” August 8, 2023, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/fentanyl.html#:~:text=Rates%20>

Currently, China remains the primary source of fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances trafficked through international mail and express consignment operations environment, as well as the main source for all fentanyl-related substances trafficked into the United States.²²⁰

More disturbing still, there are signs not merely that this trade is *tolerated*, but that it may actually be being *weaponized* by CCP officials whose political iconography has so long fetishized the humiliation of the Opium War. As one expert at the Brookings Institution recounts,

China, however, sees its counternarcotics enforcement, and more broadly its international law enforcement cooperation, as strategic tools that it can instrumentalize to achieve other objectives. Unlike the U.S. Government, which seeks to delink counternarcotics cooperation with China from the overall bilateral geostrategic relationship, China *subordinates* its counternarcotics cooperation to its geostrategic relations. As the relationship between the two countries deteriorated, China's willingness to cooperate with the United States declined. Since 2020, China's cooperation with U.S.

of%20overdose%20deaths%20involving,times%20the%20rate%20in%202013.

²²⁰ U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, "Fentanyl Flow to the United States," DEA-DCT-DIR-008-20, January 2020, p. 2, available at https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/DEA_GOV_DIR-008-20%20Fentanyl%20Flow%20in%20the%20United%20States_0.pdf; see also, for example, Liana W. Rosen, Ricardo Barrios, & Susan V. Lawrence, "China Primer: Illicit Fentanyl and China's Role," Congressional Research Service Report IF 10890, Version 13, September 28, 2023, p. 2 ("The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control has so far sanctioned more than 40 mainland China or Hong Kong-based persons in relation to fentanyl trafficking."), available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10890>.

counternarcotics efforts, never high, declined substantially. In August 2022, China officially announced that it suspended all counternarcotics and law enforcement cooperation with the United States. ... Chinese Government officials also unofficially extend the umbrella of party protection and government authority to actors who operate in both legal and illegal enterprises as well as to outright criminal groups.”²²¹

At the time of writing in August 2024, China has reportedly just begun to impose some restrictions upon the production of some fentanyl precursor chemicals “after years of U.S. pressure.”²²² It has been suggested, however, that even *this* obscenely overdue step may have to do more with reducing antagonism to China just before the U.S. presidential election²²³ than with any desire not to inflict socially disruptive suffering upon Americans. (And, in any event, catastrophic damage has already been done.) We therefore indeed may see here yet another parallel between 19th Century imperialism and China’s present-day engagement with the world, as well as another example of the *mimetic* aspects of modern China’s imperialist ambition.

What are we, then, to make of all this? The historically minded reader may recall that Lenin felt imperialism to be “the highest stage of capitalism,”²²⁴ and that, proceeding

²²¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, “China’s role in the fentanyl crisis,” *Brookings Institution*, March 31, 2023, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-role-in-the-fentanyl-crisis/>.

²²² See Brian Spegele, “China Restricts Fentanyl Chemicals after Years of U.S. Pressure,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2024, available at https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-restricts-fentanyl-chemicals-after-years-of-u-s-pressure-b53da4d9?st=1oa7p5vt7nma61h&reflink=article_email_share.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” 1916, in *Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1963, p. 667,

from this idea, some Marxist scholars in China have further argued that “neo-imperialism” is the highest and final stage of imperialism.²²⁵ Through the prism of the CCP’s vision of Chinese “national rejuvenation,” it may be that we should now see modern Beijing’s *Chinese* neo-imperialism as itself being such an ultimate, evolved form of imperial domination.

The analytical framing suggested by this paper, therefore, may be of significance in helping the rest of the world understand and react to the challenges of modern Chinese power. Understanding the fundamentally imperialist nature of CCP strategy, of course, naturally raises important questions. Given the velocity of social, economic, and technological change in today’s rapidly evolving world, can CCP leaders really hope for anything even remotely like Europe’s long years of imperialist dominance? Or will the Party-State’s arrogant and self-aggrandizing imperial project of “national rejuvenation” soon encounter modern analogues to the waves of 20th Century anti-imperialist and anti-colonial mobilization, in which the Global South sought to assert its own sovereignty and autonomy vis-à-vis imperialist hegemonism?

This latter possibility is a fascinating one. The United States’ own world-making project in the years after 1945 was a fecund time which gave rise to the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, the Bretton Woods monetary system, the International Monetary Fund, the International Trade Organization, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and other pillars of postwar international order. Despite the

available at

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>.

²²⁵ See, for example, Bin Yu, “Neo-Imperialism: the Final Stage of Imperialism,” *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2020, p. 495, available at

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21598282.2020.1871800>.

many successes of American Cold War statesmen, however, our world order today also owes a great deal to the disintegration of the various European empires during the era of decolonization—a vast process driven by a veritable tidal wave of

human agency the [Dean] Achesons and [George] Kennans (not to mention McGeorge Bundy) never imagined: the fierce energy of aroused colonial or semicolonial peoples in the 1940s, collectivities for whom imperialism and a recent feudal past were hated realities, and the promises of liberal world order and utter chimera.²²⁶

We should remember the world-historical power of that anti-imperialist human agency as we look at China's Janus-faced engagement with world today. On the one hand, Beijing has long sought to associate itself with the Global South, claiming—as “the largest developing country in the world”²²⁷—to be sympathetic to its concerns and indeed to play a global leadership role at its head against an unjust world of former imperialist powers. On the other hand, as we have seen, China is now also unmistakably an imperial power in its own right, a 21st Century analogue to the hated 19th Century Europeans in essentially every way except (so far) for the actual establishment of settler colonial regimes in far-flung portions of the world.

Whether or not China's attempt at a *new*, Sinocentric imperium will run into problems from this anti-imperialist human agency as the Global South seeks to preserve the

²²⁶ Bruce Cumings, “The Assumptions Did It,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, Melvyn P. Leffler & Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 139.

²²⁷ See Kawashima Shin, “How China Defines the ‘Global South’: Beijing tries to make the term its own,” *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2024, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/how-china-defines-the-global-south/#:~:text=During%20the%20First%20High%2DLevel,member%20of%20the%20'Global%20South>.

sovereignty and autonomy it won from Europe — and what specific form such problems would take — is beyond the scope of this paper. For those in the rest of the world concerned about the implications of Chinese power, however, the Chinese Communist Party's "neo-neo-imperialism" must be understood as one of the major trends of the modern era. There are rich historical ironies here, of course, but it follows from this that the countries of the Global South now share a powerful common interest with the United States and the developed Western democracies in some form of a new, anti-imperialist partnership to protect and advance the rules-based international order that safeguards the independence and autonomy of sovereign peoples everywhere.²²⁸

²²⁸ It is often forgotten today that the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movements of the 20th Century drew in critical, even indispensable ways upon international legal principles and value discourses valorizing political sovereignty and national autonomy that had themselves first developed in the states of the Euro-Atlantic community. See, for example, Osterhammel, *op. cit.*, p. 500 (noting the degree to which some scholars in late 19th Century China and Japan became international legal experts in order to use Western concepts of international treaty law to help "fend off Western claims" and leverage international legal principles against interventionist foreigners). Whether they were undertaken in the name of national sovereignty and democratic self-governance or in the name of Marxist internationalism, the anticolonial movements of the 20th Century were rooted in Western-originating values and ideologies as they transcended their initial civilizational specificity. The *de facto* universalism of the Western-derived values of sovereign national autonomy and democratic self-governance — or at least their structural centrality to and role in ensuring the very *existence* of most of the countries of the Global South — is worth remembering and protecting today in the face of China's own effort to win a sort of Gramscian ideological hegemony for its own conceptions of monist Sinocentric "harmony."

About the Author

The Hon. Christopher Ford is Professor of International Relations and Strategic Studies with the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and Principal of Two Ravens Policy & Strategy LLC. From 2018-21, he served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, for the last 15 months of that period also performing the duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. Dr. Ford is the author of two books on China and numerous articles, chapters, papers, and monographs.

Previous National Institute Press *Occasional Papers*

Volume 4 (2024)

Mark B. Schneider, *Current and Projected Growth of China's Nuclear Arsenal*, October 2024

Keith B. Payne, Michaela Dodge, Matthew R. Costlow, David J. Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, September 2024

Michaela Dodge, *Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions*, August 2024

Michaela Dodge, ed., *The 75th Anniversary of NATO's Founding: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead*, July 2024

David J. Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the "Two-War Strategy" and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, June 2024

Joseph R. DeTrani, *The North Korean Threat: Intelligence and Diplomacy – A Personal Memoir*, May 2024

Matthew R. Costlow, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report*, April 2024

Steve Lambakis, *Moving Missile Defense Sensors to Space*, March 2024

Christopher A. Ford, *Nuclear Posture and Nuclear Posturing: A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing China's Nuclear Weapons Policy*, February 2024

Michaela Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*, January 2024

Volume 3 (2023)

Jennifer Bradley, *The Democratization of Deterrence: The Impact of Individuals and the Private Sector on Strategic Deterrence*, November 2023

David J. Trachtenberg, ed., *Lessons Learned from Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, October 2023

Keith B. Payne, *The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for "Tripolar" Deterrence*, September 2023

Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, August 2023

Matthew R. Costlow, *Restraints at the Nuclear Brink: Factors in Keeping War Limited*, July 2023

Gary L. Geipel, *Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World*, June 2023

John A. Gentry, *Influence Operations of China, Russia, and the Soviet Union: A Comparison*, May 2023

David J. Trachtenberg, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Missile Defense Review*, April 2023

Keith B. Payne, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, March 2023

Michaela Dodge and Matthew R. Costlow, eds., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 National Security Strategy*, February 2023

Christopher A. Ford, *Assessing the Biden Administration's "Big Four" National Security Guidance Documents*, January 2023

Volume 2 (2022)

David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait: Potential Economic Tools for a Victory Denial Strategy*, December 2022

Kathleen C. Bailey, *China's Quest for a New International Order and Its Use of Public Diplomacy as a Means*, November 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World*, October 2022

Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, September 2022

Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, August 2022

Jennifer Bradley, *China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy*, July 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Building Partnerships Against Chinese Revisionism: A "Latticework Strategy" for the Indo-Pacific*, June 2022

Ilan Berman, *Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy*, May 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania*, April 2022

Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, *Victory Denial: Deterrence in Support of Taiwan*, March 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Defending Taiwan: Defense and Deterrence*, February 2022

Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question*, January 2022

Volume 1 (2021)

Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses*, December 2021

Thomas D. Grant, *China's Nuclear Build-Up and Article VI NPT: Legal Text and Strategic Challenge*, November 2021

Susan Koch, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, October 2021

Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, *Stable Deterrence and Arms Control in a New Era*, September 2021

Steve Lambakis, *Space as a Warfighting Domain: Reshaping Policy to Execute 21st Century Spacepower*, August 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *A Net Assessment of "No First Use" and "Sole Purpose" Nuclear Policies*, July 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, June 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *Safety in Diversity: The Strategic Value of ICBMs and the GBSD in the Nuclear Triad*, May 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, *Congress' Role in National Security Decision Making and the Executive-Legislative Dynamic*, April 2021

Bradley A. Thayer, *The PRC's New Strategic Narrative as Political Warfare: Causes and Implications for the United States*, March 2021

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic During the Radar Debate and Beyond*, February 2021

Keith B. Payne, *Redefining Stability for the New Post-Cold War Era*, January 2021