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Research Article

Implications of Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy on foreign students' perception of Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: China's engagement with the world has been evolving to reflect its various economic developments, and although China's economic progress since 2010 may not be a shock to many, its recent dramatic re-emergence at the centre of global politics has thrown familiar issues into a sharp relief. One such issue is the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been of key interest to policy makers, and which, since 2015, has expanded immensely to link China with Asia, Europe and Africa, boosting trade, development and cultural exchange throughout a broad infrastructure network. This paper presents the findings of a study that was designed to examine the implications of Chinese foreign policy on the perceptions of BRI among foreign students of the East China Normal University in Shanghai, China. The findings of the study reveal that the foreign students' perceptions of BRI are influenced by how Chinese foreign policy is and was perceived in their respective home countries, and that the experience of living in China had little or no impact in changing their established perceptions. Based on these findings, the study concludes that, the future implementation of BRI will be highly influenced by the existing Chinese diplomatic relations, and as such recommends the consolidation and expansion of China's existing diplomatic relations if it desires a smoother and better adoption of the BRI in other countries.

Keywords: BRI, Chinese foreign policy, geopolitics, economics, perceptions

Çin diplomasisi ve dış politikasının yabancı öğrencilerin Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi algısı üzerindeki etkileri

Öz: Çin'in dünya ile ilişkileri Çin'in iktisadi kalkınmasını yansıtacak şekilde gelişmektedir. Çin'in 2010'dan beri süren iktisadi gelişimi birço kişiyi şaşırtmamış olsa da Çin'in dünya siyasetinin merkezinde yakın zamanda ve dramatik şekilde yeniden ortaya çıkması alışıldık konuların keskin şekilde yeniden canlanması ile sonuçlanıyor. Bu konulardan biri, politika belirleyicilerin oldukça ilgisini çeken ve 2015 itibariyle Çin'i Asya, Avrupa, Afrika'ya ticaret, kalkınma ve kültür kanalları ve altyapı ağları aracılığıyla bağlayacak olan Kuşak ve Yok İnisiyatifi'nin yürürlüğe konmasıydı. Bu makale, Doğu Çin Normal Üniversitesi'ndeki yabancı uyruklu öğrencilerin Kuşak ve Yok İnisiyatifi ile ilgili algılarının Çin dış politikası üzerine olan etkilerini araştırmak üzere kurgulanmış bir çalışmanın bulgularını sunmaktadır. Bulgular, Kuşak ve Yol Projesi ile ilgili yabancı öğrencilerin algılarının, Çin'in dış politikasının geçmişte ve günümüzde kendi ülkelerinde algılanma biçimi ile ilişkili olduğunu ve yabancı öğrencilerin Çin'de yaşıyor olmalarının önceki deneyimlerinden kaynaklı algılar üzerinde bir değişime yol açmadığını veya çokk az değişime yol açtığını göstermektedir. Bu bulgulara istinaden bu makale, Kuşak ve Yol Projesi'nin gelecekteki uygulamasının, Çin'in şu anki mevcut diplomatik ilişkilerinden etkileneceği sonucuna varmaktadır. Makale, diğer ülkelerde Kuşak ve Yol Projesinin olumlu karşılanması için Çin'in mevcut diplomatik ilişkilerini güçlendirmesi ve genişletmesi gerektiği yönünde tavsiyede bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kuşak ve Yol Projesi, Çin dış politikası, jeopolitik, ekonomi, algılar

Introduction

The Chinese political economy, development strategies and foreign policies over the last 40 years have been the subject of numerous books and academic articles (Brada, Wachtel and Yang eds. 2017; Enfu and Xiaoqin 2017; Henson and Yap eds. 2016; Mayer ed. 2018; Zhang 2016; Wong and Zhiyue 2010). In most of these, focus has been on documenting "China's phenomenal transformation from an agricultural, self-contained, and inward-looking nation into a global economic powerhouse, in the course of a mere three decades of reform, [as it] continues to

be a source of inspiration and awe" (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2018, 386). That is to say, there are many people who are keen to chart China's journey from being a developing country and the third largest economy in the world to becoming the second largest economy, overtaking Japan (Brada, Wachtel and Yang eds. 2017), with the expectation that China is set to exercise her newly acquired global powers and take on global responsibilities. As stated by Xi Jinping during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on 18 October, 2017, China has entered a "New Era", and this is clearly apparent in the various leadership roles that China taking on, such as its commitment to the Paris environment deal after the departure of the United States (US). Furthermore, as the second largest economy in the world, China is likely to play a key role in the reform and reconstruction of the international order (Goldstein 2017; Yongnian and Wenxin 2015), which may be reflected in China's move in October 2013 to launch the "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)" and "Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century" Initiative (MSRI), known collectively as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), and the founding of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016. These initiatives, and especially the BRI, aim to revitalise China's centrality in the world, and to recapture the status it held at the time of the Ancient Silk Road almost 2000 years ago. As such, a better way to explain this New Silk Road phenomenon is by contextualising it within China's foreign and economic development policy, or more simply, its intended goal to rejuvenate China's new global status with the aid of history (Economy 2017; French 2017; Garrick and Bennett 2019; Mayer 2018).

If one was to examine China's foreign policy trends over the last 40 years, among most striking features would be its evolution to reflect the various economic development trajectories (Ferchen 2016; Liping 1991; Weissmann 2015; Zhang 2016). As such, when documenting the economic reforms that were kick-started in the late 1970s, and more radical changes seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some scholars and observers of contemporary Chinese politics described China as a country that adopted the tactics of modern democratic states, but without embracing the democracy model (Zhang 2016; Brady and Juntao 2009). Furthermore, the emphasis on the economy over the past four decades or so has seen China increase its status from a developing country to become the second largest economy in the world (Yu 2017; Xiao 2016), and as the result, China is today expected take on a leading role in the world by exercising "leadership compatible with its growing strength by providing more resources for development and other global goals" (Xiao 2016, 439).

In assuming such a position, China's membership of multilateral organizations has grown from seven from 1949 to 1970, to 298 between 1980 and

2007 (Zhang 2016, 15). As of 2013, China has placed more emphasis on "economic diplomacy" after declaring it a priority, with the launch of the BRI and the establishment of the AIIB being the most recent manifestations (Ohashi 2019; Zang 2016). Under this new approach to diplomacy, which can be defined as "the process through which countries tackle the outside world, to maximize their national gains in all the fields including investments and other forms of economically beneficial exchange" (Rana 2007, 201), China's current economic endeavours can be articulated. That is to say, within the context of economic diplomacy and development policies, both the BRI and AIIB can be understood and contextualized as part and parcel of China's current diplomatic and economic development initiatives, although the focus of this paper will be the former – the BRI.

China's Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an official name of the proposed development strategy or the grand Chinese economic initiative known formally as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative. It comprises the twin economic initiatives of the "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)" and the "Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century" Initiative (MSRI)" that were launched by President Xi Jinping in September and October 2013, respectively, during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia (Arugay 2017; Blanchard and Flint 2017). Under the existing global economic governance architecture, the BRI sets out a new framework that defines the ways in which China provides economic goods to the world, while also rejuvenating China's historical place in the global economy (French 2017; Mayer 2018). While China's economic progress since 2010 may not be a shock to many, its recent dramatic re-emergence at the centre of global politics throws familiar issues into sharp relief (Beeson and Bisley 2013). One such issue is the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which, since 2015, has expanded immensely to link China with Asia, Europe and Africa, boosting trade, development and cultural exchange throughout a broad infrastructure network. In fact, the BRI forms "the centrepiece of the economic, political, and strategic policy framework of the fifth generation leadership of China" (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2018, 393) and its new foreign policy.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the BRI is an "important topic in international debates, and has much to do with several broad topics, such as the rise of China, the direction of China's foreign policy and the China-US rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region" (Wang 2016, 445), and that recent studies have located the BRI in the global politics and re-ordering of the existing international order (Berlie, ed. 2020; Farooq, Feroze and Kai 2019; Joshua, 2019a; 2019b; Lei 2018;

Rong and Zhu eds. 2018; Syed and Ying eds. 2019; Thaliyakkattill 2019; Xing ed. 2019; Zhang, Alon and Lattermann eds. 2018), little has been reported about the perspectives of foreign students of the BRI as a geopolitical initiative (Summers 2016) that aims to reform the existing international order, despite the influence of the BRI on the internalisation of Chinese education and the increasing number of students in the Chinese universities from the BRI countries (Peters 2019). As Blanchard and Flint (2017, 224) observe, although "coverage of the [BRI] in policy papers and the mass media has been steadily expanding, though there are, relatively speaking, few academic treatments of these initiatives." Accordingly, the present study seeks to examine how the foreign students perceive the Chinese BRI.

Geographically, historically and economically speaking, China is clearly the pivot of the Silk Road (SR), both old and new. Geographically, the SR comprised two parts: the overland SR and the maritime SR, with the former being more established and better known (Yongnian and Wenxin 2015, 7). The overland Silk Road was more than 10,000 km long, stretching from China to Rome, and its origins can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), when imperial envoy Zhang Qian was sent to the Far West to develop friendly relations. The development of the Maritime Silk Road, on the other hand, when the Chinese ventured into Southeast Asia, known traditionally as Nanyang, particularly during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2018). When viewed from an economic vantage point, China was the pivot also of the ancient SR, given the historically larger and relatively better developed economy of China than those of the states along the trade routes (Yongnian and Wenxin 2015, 8). Given the historic, economic and geographic origins of these trade routes, the new BRI reflects a further significant aspect of the new era, being the "more proactive approach by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the global anticipations concerning China's international obligation and leadership" (Ehizuelen and Abdi 2018, 387), and how China is set to become a change maker (Alden and Large 2015; Clack 2014) in the existing international order. The BRI also provides of how is China determined to influence the world through the creation of new international institutions such as the AIIB to overcome the constraints of existing global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since "China's economic and political ascent signals an epochal change" (Mayer ed. 2018, 1), it makes sense to examine these signs of economic and political ascent in terms of the strategic and geopolitical implications of the BRI, one being how it is perceived among foreign students' in Chinese Universities who have the potential to become future world leaders.

The present study aims in particular to explore the extent to which Chinese foreign policy, its existing bilateral agreements and its cooperation with the home countries of the student respondents influenced their perception of the BRI, which is often portrayed as an unparalleled economic initiative. The project was originally conceived to resolve two major problems faced by the Chinese economy, being overcapacity and the excessive foreign exchange reserve (Wang 2016). However, one may wonder how China could distance itself from resorting to the use of the BRI for geopolitical gains. Any move by China to define its place in the world and to regain its historically "rightful place" would immediately ring alarm bells in the neighbouring countries, to the extent that even an attempt to seek greater geo-political space to be commensurate with its rising economic power would be interpreted as "over assertiveness" (Wong 2014). As such, it is evident that the BRI would be perceived differently by foreign students, who would be influenced by the existing relationships between their countries of origin and China, which was the primary motivation behind this investigation.

In particular, this paper focuses on the views and perspectives of foreign students enrolled at East China Normal University (ECNU) on the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) that was launched in 2013. The study further explores the implications of Chinese foreign policy and the existing relationship between the home countries of the University's foreign students and their perspectives of the BRI. This based on an examination of their views prior to, and after having lived in China for at least three months or more. The constant presence of the BRI on the agenda of public and international discourse in China is a leading factor in the choice of this issue for study. The study excluded Chinese students on the assumption that they may be biased as Chinese citizens, and it is unlikely that many would be sufficiently aware of China's foreign policies and strategies around the world. Accordingly, the study seeks to provide an understanding of whether China's engagement with foreign countries has any influence on the opinions and perspectives of students from those countries on this newly launched initiative – the BRI.

Approaching China's Belt and Road Initiative case

Deciding how to undertake a particular study is as critical as choosing the subject to research. In this part, we present the approach to be adopted for the examination of the topic. The selected approach has three related aspects. First, an examination is made of the leading debates and trends in the literature on the issue of the BRI, with the objective of identifying the dominant debates that are represented in the growing body of literature on the subject. In the following stage, an examination is made of how the BRI is represented in the ongoing

debates and in the theoretical approaches. Finally, the study method and the data sources are presented.

Debates

Since the date of its launch up to the present day, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is almost a defining feature of China's future economic and foreign policy (Zhang 2016). In a broader context, the BRI will see the creation of "six economic corridors encompassing more than 60 countries in the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, encouraging trade and investments among those countries" (Huang, Fischer and Xu 2017, 160). The envisaged overland SREB will comprise railway links through Central Asia, Iran and Turkey that will circumvent the railway connections through Russia itself along the Trans-Siberian Railway (Fallon 2015, 15); while the maritime route (MSRI) is expected to begin in Fuzhou (a city in Fujian, China), taking in Southeast Asia through the South China Sea, and then extend to the Indian Ocean via the Malacca Strait, and further to the Mediterranean and Europe. The other route will pass direct from Kolkata in India to Nairobi in Kenya, connecting also to Europe, the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, with branches to various Eastern African countries, such as Djibouti, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Tanzania (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 226). Once completed, the BRI is expected to promote connectivity in the fields of trade, infrastructure and currency, based on a multi-layered collaboration between the relevant countries and international organisations, leading to the development of trade and economic cooperation among the connected nations.

Since the launch of the BRI, there have been ranges of opinions on its purpose, which have "varied from 'cheerleaders' who see it as part of a benevolent development project led by the Peoples Republic of China, to 'doom-laden geopolitical representations' that portray the project as another step towards an inevitable confrontation between the United States and China over dominion in the Asia Pacific Region and global hegemony" (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 238). Although, emphasis has always been on the economic benefits, there have been studies suggesting geopolitical motivations behind China's BRI (Fallon 2015; Minghao 2016; Sidaway and Woon 2017; Hu 2017; Summers 2016).

Fallon (2015, 140–141), for example, suggests that the BRI "has three drivers: (1) energy, (2) security, (3) markets. Like the silken strands on a loom, these drivers will weave together to create a fabric of interconnected transport corridors and port facilities that will boost trade, improve security, and aid strategic penetration, or will simply bring about the 'great rejuvenation of the nation,', being an expression of China's confidence and international clout." As Yu (2017, 368) further comments, the BRI "forms the centrepiece of the new

foreign policy of the Chinese leadership, and is a reflection of China's ascendance in the global arena, economically, politically and strategically." More explicitly, Minghao (2016, 114) observes that

> [s]ome European policy elites argue that the [BRI] is China's own Marshall Plan, and that China intends to leverage the initiative to transform its economic power into geopolitical influence, to increase its control over the Eurasian continent and to promote the Chinese version of globalization.

As such, "from geopolitical and geo-economic perspectives, the [BRI] is bound to alter relations between China and Europe, Russia, the United States, and other major powers" (Minghao 2016, 109). If it is executed successfully, the BRI may lead to the creation of a single Asian-European, or perhaps even a single Asian-European-African, trading bloc, which would challenge the present US-centred trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific trading bloc system (Economist 2016).

Theoretical framework

This study employs Simon's (1997) concept of bounded rationality (BR) and the interdependency theory (IT) of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), as the best theoretical shortcuts to understanding how actors make decisions and choices – in this case, decisions about joining Belt and Road Initiative. The latter of these, IT, rests on three assumptions: the use of multiple channels and actors in the interactions between states, and between states and international regimes; the role of the economic variable in changing agendas and linkages between prioritized issues; and the use of the non-military instrument of state craft (Keohane & Nye 1989). Thus, by focusing on international regimes, the theory promotes the greater use of soft power, diplomacy and cooperation through the forms and procedures of international law (Zhang 2016, 28).

For the former, BR, it means "a rational choice that takes into account the cognitive limitations of the decision-maker — the limitations of both knowledge and computational capacity" (Simon 1997, 291). Unlike with unbounded rationality, BR entails the policy maker or government negotiator lacking all the information about situations on which they are deciding and negotiating (Zhang 2016). Understood in the context of China's economic diplomacy, BR calls for an understanding of "the country's symbolic macrostructures: the political motivations, incentives, and ideological belief that are part of interpretive lens […]" (Zhang 2016, 31). In this line of thinking, "foreign policy behaviour is a response to the strategic problems facing the nation; and as such, a nation will be moved to act by threats and opportunities arising from the international strategic

'marketplace'" (Allison 1971, 33). Given the fact that no country is purely rational in its control of decision making, and thus needs other countries, BR and interdependency theory are useful for understanding the dynamics of the BRI, and especially for understanding why countries are joining this initiative, thus influencing the perspectives of its people, among which students are included.

Study methodology

This paper examines how the BRI is perceived among the East China Normal University (ECNU) foreign students. The intention was to understand how students' perceptions of the BRI were influenced by Chinese foreign policy, especially under the influence of the pre-existing relationship between China and their home countries. To this end, the paper draws upon a part of study that answered the specific question of: How are the perceptions of foreign students of the BRI influenced by Chinese foreign policy? The assumption guiding this question was that foreign students' perceptions of the BRI were shaped by their exposure to, and opinions of Chinese foreign policy.

The approach to the collection of data and the analysis of the textual documents and transcripts of the interviews for the study followed the scheme proposed by Kvale (1996 and 2007), who says of the approach: "the analysis runs through from description to interpretation. This process is referred to as 'interpreting as you go'" (as quoted by Ntibagirirwa 2014, 217). The findings presented in this paper are drawn from both the field data and a desk research of the issue. The field data came from semi-structured research interviews conducted in Shanghai between December 2017 and January 2018 with foreign student studying at the ECNU. Most of the respondents were graduate students enrolled in various programmes, including engineering, humanities, and natural and social sciences. For the purpose of the data generation, a sample size of 25 participants was selected for the semi-structured interviews although the actual participation was 15. The interviews lasted from 25 minutes to 190 minutes, with a mean average duration of 57.5 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

In the desk research, data was garnered from a purposive review of literature examining Chinese economic diplomacy or foreign policy with specific focus on the BRI. The selected documents included both first-hand information from respondents gathered by several researchers and published in various outlets, and articles providing a critical view. This literature review also included sources making general discussions on China's foreign policy and its economic development over the last four decades.

Once the interview transcriptions and textual document analysis was complete, the garnered data was subjected to a qualitative analysis with the aid of discourse analysis, and categorized into various themes and sub-themes. As stated earlier, in the present study, as in most qualitative studies, the data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. The data analysis largely followed the six steps proposed by Kvale (1996) for qualitative data analyses, including:

> bringing the interviewees to describe their lived world; bringing the interviewees to discover and see new meaning in their experience during the interview; condensing and interpreting during the interview; transcription and interpretation of the interview material; re-interview, and action (as quoted by Ntibagirirwa 2014, 217).

In this respect, one can succinctly contend that in a qualitative data analysis, there exist a number of common features in the processing and analysis of data.

The data analysis in the present study is based on the abovementioned procedures, followed by three qualitative data analysis processes, namely data reduction (selecting, focusing, abstracting and transforming information in the form of written field notes and transcriptions of in-depth interviews, as well as published and unpublished documents), display and conclusion, as developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). It should be understood that: "When analysing qualitative data such as interview transcripts, analyses across the whole set of data typically produce clusters or codes that translate into 'themes'" (Given 2008, 120). Themes refer to the topics or major subjects that come up in discussions (Kombo & Tromp 2006, 119). In this way, it was possible for the researchers to garner answers to their research questions from documents and from the feelings and perceptions on the BRI of the respondents.

Foreign students' perceptions of Chinese BRI

The purpose of this paper was to identify the extent to which Chinese foreign policy influences the views and perceptions of the BRI of foreign students. The examined issues included the ways in which Chinese foreign policy influenced the opinion of foreign students on the BRI; whether their home countries should be part of this initiative; and the contribution of the initiative. Accordingly, in this section we present an analysis of the empirical material gathered for the study. For the presentation and analysis of the findings, the analysed field data is grouped into categories that reflect the particular themes that recur within the data. Due to ethical and privacy concerns, pseudonyms were used rather than the real names of the participants.

Generally, the opinions on the actual nature of the initiative varied greatly among the respondents. Quotes from two of the respondents serve to illustrate this:

> I perceive the BRI as a Chinese Marshall Plan for the world. While more African countries have been included as an afterthought, I still see the BRI as an opportunity to benefit from Chinese investment and funding. In a particular, I think that Africa may be one of the strategic continents that, if well organised, stands to benefit from this multi-billion dollar project. It is an attempt by China to expand both her industrial investments and exports of goods in search of markets, with Africa being one of the destinations (Msemakweli, 21.12.2017).

A similar view was voiced by Almas:

> From what I understand, the BRI is a Chinese economic development plan in which they are investing time, energy and money. As a person from a country that is a strategic partner to China, I have heard about it from our leaders, and have seen some investments made in my country. It is a great initiative that will expand the Chinese market not only into my country, but into most Asian countries, such as those in the Middle East, and many other countries in both Europe and Africa. […] I have heard that it will include more than 72 countries (Almas, 20.12.2017).

Both Msemakweli and Almas referred to the BRI as an economic initiative – a kind of financing system plan – from which countries can benefit from significantly through participation with the right strategies. They stated further, however, that BRI opportunities come with possible challenges and threats. For Pakistan, for example, Almas stated that he hoped the BRI would help in the expansion of his country's export market, rather than just turning the country into another market for Chinese goods. For Msemakweli, although Africa was not originally part of the initiative, with the adjustments currently being made within the BRI, well-organised African countries would benefit greatly from the kind of BRI investments discussed in this Chinese initiative.

Implications of Chinese foreign policy on foreign students' opinions of BRI

As mentioned earlier, the present study was launched to examine the implications of Chinese foreign policy on the respondents' perceptions of the BRI. In a way, this section serves as a stepping stone to the understanding of the foreign students' perceptions of the BRI.

Msemakweli, as a Ugandan citizen who once had the chance to engage in negotiations with Chinese people, gave his opinions of the implications of Chinese foreign policy on his BRI perspective:

> Uganda's engagement with China has been growing, and in recent years I have witnessed more in terms of investment and the financing of infrastructure. To some extent, yes, it has influenced my opinion, but not wholly. More particularly I have been involved in talks in which Chinese delegates and delegates from other African countries have been negotiating. By engaging with such a variety of people, I have widened my understanding of how China is changing her approach to the economy and economic aid. What I think is that the BRI may be the main platform of economic investment in the future, and the countries not connected to it are unlikely to be the first priority in Chinese investments (Msemakweli, 21.12.2017).

Similarly, Patel also raised the existing relationship between China and Pakistan when giving his views and opinions. All his knowledge of the BRI was shaped by the existing relationship between the two countries:

> In my view, the BRI project is highly influenced by the existing China-Pakistan relationship. I see the BRI as an expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has been in existence for quite some time. From this, it comes automatically that the BRI has something in common with the CPEC, and that is what largely defines my opinion, as there is no way I can like the CPEC but dislike the BRI (Patel, 10.01.2018).

Mohamed had different view of this issue, but was also influenced by the relationship that exists between India and China. He seemed to have a very different and more critical opinion of the BRI, recalling the impact of the historical silk routes that had made the nations that controlled the trade corridors rich, while weaker societies were colonised:

> Through the BRI, China wants to sideline India and Japan in Asia, and of course to dominate Asia […]. Even the British East India Company came to India first for trade, but then colonised India 300 years later; so the same may happen for the Chinese BRI. The Chinese BRI is already a failed project. [How?] … Because Japan and India have formed an economic alliance to counter the strategic design of the BRI in Asia (Mohamed, 18.12.2017).

From these accounts, it is evident that the implication of Chinese foreign policy and the existing relationship China has with a particular country is at the centre of the respondents' understanding and perspective of the BRI. Each person expresses their opinion in a tone reflecting the relationship between China and their home country, and in a way represents such a political view. Thus, for the respondents, residing in China seems to consolidate their existing opinions of the BRI rather than transform them.

Why should a country be part of BRI?

It is important also to examine why the respondents believed their countries joined and became part of the BRI, for which a number of issues were considered, such as why a country should take part; whether a country is appropriately positioned to benefit from the initiative; and whether the participants, if they were decision makers, would have recommend their countries become part of the BRI. Under this umbrella, the implication of the respondents' perception of Chinese foreign policy was manifested. For example, Mohamed's account was based on his understanding of the rivalry in the India-China relationship, and from such a perspective, he was of the opinion that:

> India and Japan will never join the BRI, and China cannot dominate Asia without containing the rise of India and Japan. The BRI is a national initiative aimed at promoting China's national interests [...] India and Japan will, however, continue to engage with China, because no country can live in isolation. But neither of them will join, since the BRI is a strategic initiative motivated by debt-trap diplomacy (Mohamed, 18.12.2017).

While Mohamed viewed the BRI as a project motivated by debt-trap diplomacy, Almas had a provided a different view of why his country should join the initiative:

> I support it, and I hope and am sure my country will be part of the BRI. If it does not, then it should become part of the BRI. Why do I support this? It is because we are a strategic partners of China, and we can improve our economy and, especially, expand our export market and create jobs within the BRI. In short, I see the BRI as a means of improving our economy through various investments, export market creation and business expansions … Since China is assuming such an important position in the global economy, distancing your country from the BRI would mean refusing its economic opportunities (Almas, 20.12.2017).

In similar but slightly different contexts, Abebe was positive about his country joining the initiative, identifying the challenges that would be faced by not being part of the BRI:

> [...] Oooh, this I can respond to in one sentence: the later you are, the more you will lose; if you want to benefit, you must be the first, and others will find you on your way. I know that there are lot of Chinese projects in my country, so I would like my country to be part of it (Abebe, 11.01.2018).

Again, existing relations seem to be the determining factor in the opinions of the respondents on whether their respective countries should or should not be part of the BRI. For example, in his account, Abebe offered another perspective, suggesting that the BRI would be the central route through which a nation would be able to attract Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) of any kind. He even envisaged the BRI replacing the existing economic diplomacy strategy, and so for him, those countries that are not part of the BRI may find it hard to access financial resources from China.

The benefits of BRI

Another motivation to join the BRI, aside from the existing relations and policy orientations, are the expected benefits. Although the initiative is yet to be entered into operation, there are many projects underway that are related to the BRI master plan. The present study also investigates how students perceive the possible benefits of the BRI, both for the present and in the future. In a way, this approach also served to examine how the respondents linked the activities in their country with this new initiative. To begin with, Mohamed saw no hope for the BRI without the inclusion of India and Japan:

> Without Indian and Japanese involvement, the BRI is strategically meaningless. The world has many alternative projects led by various countries. One needs to learn to negotiate with every country and to get the best deal from them. I would suggest you view the BRI alongside the nationalist initiatives launched by many other countries. I know it already, now you should find out too (Mohamed, 18.12.2017).

Another two respondents, however, were more optimistic, and were able to list some of the current benefits being drawn from the BRI. Msemakweli, for example mentioned the relationship between the BRI and technology transfer:

> As for now, there is nothing much about the BRI itself, but there are plans to establish infrastructures for the BRI. For example, the standard gauge railway which will be constructed to connect with the BRI to other countries, and the BRI hub in Nairobi in particular (Msemakweli, 21.12.2017).

Patel was more convinced of the benefits of the BRI. Referring to his own country, he was able to list some of the ongoing projects linked to the BRI:

> Pakistan has been a good trading partner with China through the CPEC since 2002, but since the BRI came into being, I have seen a great deal of infrastructure development and a boom in businesses between China

> and Pakistan. This has increased our revenues and has brought some job opportunities to my country (Patel, 10.01.2018).

However, he also noted some possible threats and dangers associated with the BRI. Responding to the question on whether he foresees possible imbalances resulting from the BRI, Patel said:

> I think […] especially if Pakistan is not well positioned, it may end up serving only China's interests. In my view, our leaders have to strategize and really defend Pakistan's interests. Otherwise, we may end up being only a bridge for China to do business in other countries (Patel, 10.01.2018).

As such, while the opportunities and benefits that will be brought by the BRI have been acknowledged, it also comes with possible threats. Countries interested in this initiative should be prepared and bring their interests to the negotiation table, and to make sure that they negotiate a good deal through which they will be able to capitalise on the funding coming with the BRI by strengthening their own domestic economy. They should seek in particular to benefit from the enlarged BRI market and increase their exports through the increased economic opportunities and markets. As Patel and Almas suggest, there is a need to improve the participation of people in decisions related to BRI projects as a means of introduce the available opportunities, as well as getting to know what their countries and leaders are committing to.

Discussion of the findings

Based on the presented and analysed data, it can be argued that, the perceptions of the BRI among foreign students are based on the way they perceive Chinese foreign policy within their own countries. Further, their experience living in China served to consolidate what they previously thought about the initiative, which was revealed in the various accounts of the respondents, which in a way was predetermined by the existing status of the relationship between their home countries and China. As such, although when Xi was launching the new Silk Road proposal in 2013, the "underlining philosophy of China's foreign policy was that China would like to work with other countries to create a 'community of destiny', of mutual benefit and win-win for all, and a 'community of interests' of shared development and prosperity" (Wang 2016, 457–458), this has failed to transform the existing rivalries between China and such countries as the US, Japan and India. As such, one respondent in particular argued that the relationship between China and India takes the form of a strategic rivalry over the domination of Asia, and there are many strategic thinkers who claim the BRI

is a strategic initiative of China to enter and take control of the Indian Ocean (Brewster 2017). This was also evident in the way some of the respondents viewed the BRI. To some, although "Africa is not a major region along the BRI, and thus difficult for African States to fully benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative" (Chen 2016, 179); the respondents from Africa were very positive about the BRI in Africa, and in their home countries in particular. In this regard, these findings seems to confirm that the pre-existing nature of China's engagement with individual countries influenced significantly the way foreign students perceived and viewed China, Chinese affairs and the BRI.

For example, according to Sautman and Hairong (2009, 748–749), the image of China in Africa is positive. In their survey of five African countries to understand how China is perceived, they concludes that "despite what the international media suggests, our findings show that Africans are on the whole inclined to favour links with China. While these media are not determinative of how Africans think, their influence cannot be ignored, particularly when they amplify the voice of domestic parties that play the China card." As the data showed, however, the source of information had little impact on changing perceptions, and it was the pre-existing orientations that were instead prominent, to the extent to which even reading the news seemed to dictate one's position regarding China and the BRI. Again, looking at Sautman and Hairong (2009, 746), in the same survey, even in countries like Zambia, people had a

> more negative perception of China's policies on the continent, and its adaptation to local society and neo-colonialism, but perceived considerable common interests between China and Africa (51 percent), were enthusiastic about China's rise (60 percent) and were more positive about China's non-interference policy than in five of the other countries.

This indicates that China is still viewed as one of the successful developing nations, which is an image and position that China often portrays in the international arena (Zhang 2016), thus serving better its geo-strategic interests, especially in Africa.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study suggest also that although the BRI is often presented as an economic project, such an understanding depends on the political economy that exists in a particular country. The views of the students concur with those of scholars who doubt the solely economic intentions of the BRI, and reflect the two broader views that are heard among scholars. As Summers (2016, 1628) puts it,

> some see [BRI] as primarily political – a 'geopolitical and diplomatic offensive' – in the form of an effort to extend China's political power and influence through investments that will constrain the policy choices of the recipient countries, [while] others believe that it reflects the economic and commercial drivers, creates new markets for Chinese companies or addressing the challenges facing the Chinese economy, such as industrial overcapacity or excessive reserves of US dollars.

This exposition was manifested in the responses of the students to questions asking about their views of Chinese foreign policy and the BRI, and once again followed the trend of viewing Chinese foreign policy in accordance with the existing relationships between Chana and the respondents' home country.

However, as Ehizuelen and Abdi (2018, 388) stated, while portraying the BRI as an economic project with no political strings attached:

> the investment is a *de facto* building of economic and political ties between China and the host governments, in the form of mutually beneficial relationships with neighbouring nations that can benefit China by taking over some of China's lower value-added activities.

Here, we should not overlook that views of the respondent who compared the BRI with the historical silk roads, and the early European trade engagements in Asia, which ended up with the colonisation of areas for their own interests. As such, it is understandable that some people view the BRI in this way. The respondents think that there is no way one can invest such significant amount of money without making sure that she gets the best economic returns out of it.

There are varying views among the respondents, who consider the BRI to be a strategic mechanism through which China can exert power, especially in Asia. This view is well represented by Wong et al. (2017). They argue that

> if the BRI project was merely 'one road', it would be little more than a traditional land power strategy, but the BRI opens up a secondary maritime power along China's coast, backed by the vast expanse of the country's landmass. The BRI strategy combines land power and maritime power, bolstering China's existing oceanic hegemony in East Asia […],

and as such, it cannot be limited to an economic project. This was the way one respondent viewed the BRI.

In response to the question of whether their countries should be part of the BRI, a similar way of thinking seemed to be the determining force. From the garnered data, it can be suggested that the prevailing nature of the relationship between China and the respondents' home country was a determining factor in their response to this question. Those from countries with cordial relations with

China were more interested in their countries' participation, while those on the other side had some reservations. As such, China may need to work on its foreign policy and its international relations if it wants to open up the BRI. The views of these respondents support Wang's (2016, 460) claim that the BRI lines cross different regions with whom China has different relationships, and it was common to find that relations "needed a significant amount of diplomatic investment to bring them together for cooperation." As such, it is apparent that the simple slogan announcing the BRI as economic project may not work as well as China hoped. Here, a lesson can be learnt from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Burma Economic Corridor (BCIBEC), as two important projects that were developed as comprehensive economic cooperation projects, but that also serve the objective of securing the supply of energy to the Xinjiang and Yunnan provinces of China. Despite the ongoing negotiations, the latter in particular is yet to fully take-off. A strong launch will require cordial working relations among the countries to secure the project investment. As Ehizuelen and Abdi (2018, 342) remarked, "aside from the economic underpinnings, China's vision for regional and global peace and security is a prerequisite also for bringing the belt and Road to fruition."

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the above findings, three conclusions can be drawn from the study: First, that the assumption that the perceptions of foreign students of the BRI are shaped by their exposure to, and opinions of Chinese foreign policy. The findings indicate the extent to which the impact of previous perceptions of Chinese foreign policy act as a determining factor in the perception and views of students not only of the BRI but also other Chinese issues. As such, the BRI is likely to be welcomed with open arms by countries with good relations with China, such as Pakistan and many African countries, while this may take more time and may even be impossible in countries that rival China, such as the United States, Japan and India.

Second, living in China will have little effect on changing one's perceptions of China and Chinese affairs, and hence, little impact on changing the students' perceptions of the BRI, which are defined in accordance with their perception of China's foreign policy and relations. In a way, living in China only confirmed the previously held view, and hence consolidated the position of the respondent with greater vigour as somebody with first-hand experience of China. Third, there is a need to view the BRI beyond what is defined by the ambits of foreign relations and economic diplomacy. Understanding the implication of investments that China is making or planning to make as part of the BRI need to be understood in

their entirety, as if the BRI succeeds, the BRI powerhouse will have a significant say over the interconnected economies. It confirms the "Heartland" argument of the English geographer Halford John Mackinder (see, Wong et al. 2017). With this initiative, the red flag of China will be seen almost everywhere on the African, Asian and European continents, and once connected to the BRI it will be more costly to disconnect from it.

Based on the study findings and the drawn conclusions, two recommendations can be made: First, there is a need to expand the scope and design of the study to reflect the views of more students and other people around the world, both in the countries with cordial relations with China and in its rival nations, to see whether Chinese foreign policy has such broad impacts on perceptions of the BRI. Second, China must face up to the reality that the implications of the BRI may be double-edged, and it should try to increase the confidence of the countries who have stated an interest in joining the block, allowing them to make calculated decisions before joining the BRI. If the nature of the BRI is not well planned and thought-out, opposition to the project may become the major challenge to the initiative in the future, given its need to cross highly volatile places, both on land and over water.

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