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To cite this article: Thomas P. Narins & John Agnew (2019): Missing from the Map: Chinese Exceptionalism, Sovereignty Regimes and the Belt Road Initiative, *Geopolitics*, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2019.1601082](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1601082)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1601082>



Published online: 15 Apr 2019.



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# Missing from the Map: Chinese Exceptionalism, Sovereignty Regimes and the Belt Road Initiative

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## ABSTRACT

Historical and conventional international relations (IR) frameworks describe the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) as representing a newly ambitious Chinese drive into global politics that positions China as moving away from its long-time reticence towards foreign entanglements. This raises a contradiction of China being at one and the same time both a defender of its own territorial sovereignty while also being engaged in various projects, particularly the BRI and the associated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), that point in completely different directions. This paper seeks to build upon and move beyond conventional framings to understand how the BRI represents a conflict over the workings of state sovereignty that such frameworks have trouble addressing. We argue that the absence of an official Chinese government BRI map promotes a ‘useful fuzziness’ with regards to China being open to crafting a new as of yet undefined geopolitical identity. In light of the absence of such a map, this work considers key ideas relating to China’s geopolitical expansion via the BRI in terms of so-called sovereignty regimes – the idea that various practices of authority and control emanating originally from states take different geographical shapes. Conflicts arise when a state, such as China, finds itself caught between the operational imperatives of multiple regimes. By identifying the current sovereignty dynamics raised by the BRI in light of the relevant, yet distinctive historical experience of the Marshall Plan, this work can be used as a model for understanding how China’s current leadership is managing the debate of simultaneously protecting ‘strong borders’ yet also promoting a policy of ‘going out’.

## Introduction

Historical and conventional international relations (IR) frameworks describe the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) – also known as the New Silk Road – as representing a newly ambitious Chinese drive into global politics that positions China as moving away from its long-time reticence towards foreign entanglements (Frankopan 2018; Gonzalez-Vicente 2015; Lim, Tseng, and

Lim 2016; Mações 2018; Manuel 2017; Toops 2016). Traditional IR frameworks, however, are complicated by another camp that views a ‘global’ China as a partial power – exhibiting a ‘pattern of breadth but not depth, presence but not influence’ (Shambaugh 2013, 9). China is at one and the same time both a defender of its own territorial sovereignty (and in principle, of territorial sovereignty everywhere) and yet is engaged in various projects, particularly the BRI and the associated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), that point in completely different directions (See, i.e., Grant 2018). This paper seeks to build upon and move beyond conventional framings to understand how the BRI represents a conflict over the workings of state sovereignty that such framings have trouble addressing.

We argue that the absence of an official Chinese government BRI map promotes a ‘useful fuzziness’ with regards to Chinese leaders, business people and ordinary citizens being open to crafting a new, as of yet undefined, geopolitical identity in the future. This identity may be more along the lines of a global, borderless hegemonic framework. The specific aim of this paper is to highlight that the lack of an official BRI map may in fact be an intentional move on the part of the Chinese government and thus leaves open the future course of the relationship between China and the countries and localities associated with BRI projects. Preventing the bordering of a nascent regime whose ultimate shape is still unknown can limit overt cartographic anxieties (Gregory 1994; Krishna 1994) and can reduce ongoing geopolitical controversies that have been caused by the Chinese government’s publication (and ongoing maintenance) of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea (i.e. Hayton 2017; Rolf and Agnew 2016). Given the current un-bordered framework of the BRI, we employ sovereignty regimes as a way of analysing four possible governance frameworks that the nascent BRI may eventually adopt.

That the BRI ‘is not a single plan at all’ and that its official website lacks detailed explanation of the plan’s goals (Economist 2018a) further contributes to this initiative’s undefined nature (See Jones and Zeng 2019). In fact, one of the key misunderstandings of the BRI relates to ‘the conceptualisation of the project as comprising well-defined, fixed, and predetermined (maritime and land) routes and transects (as many of the cartographic depictions...connote)’ (Sidaway and Woon 2017, 592). The ‘missing map’ in particular points towards an ambiguity surrounding the future of Chinese sovereignty, namely the shape of Chinese power. Many maps appear in articles about the BRI but they are not based on empirical data – just directional ‘gestures’ associated with ‘Silk Road’ language anchored in a few known nodes. This is an example of *misplaced geographical concreteness*, implying that more is known about the initiative as a whole and what it has so far achieved than is in fact the case. The BRI cannot, at this stage, be accurately/verifiably mapped because what it currently represents geopolitically is still unknown. Employing sovereignty regimes – geographical representations of political power – is way of exploring the geopolitical possibilities of this still

nascent set of Chinese government-inspired infrastructural and institutional frameworks. At the same time, we also seek to challenge ongoing comparisons between the US Marshall Plan and the BRI by contrasting (as well as comparing) two very different government-sponsored political economic initiatives.

Most importantly, we foreground our examination of both of these efforts by recognising that the Marshall Plan was conceived and developed at a time when what was happening geopolitically was much clearer from the outset – namely there was a widely agreed upon need to rebuild a devastated, post-World War II Europe. A very different political atmosphere characterises the geopolitical landscape upon which the BRI is evolving – e.g., although autocratic regimes continue to prevail worldwide, many of them are tolerated for their ability to foster economic growth and political stability. Since the Communist Party's assumption of power in 1949, China has been 'quite willing to offer territorial concessions despite historical legacies of external victimisation and territorial dismemberment under the Qing' (Fravel 2008, 2). In 17 out of 23 territorial conflicts, 'Beijing has offered concessions, abandoning claims to over 1.3 million square miles of land' (Nathan 2009). Scholarship on China's territorial disputes suggests that – unlike conventional, realist views of expansionist powers being 'land-grabbing' in essence – China has sought stability rather than expansion in its border disputes with neighbours.

At a time when Chinese President Xi Jinping 'is keen to create new governance norms rather than follow old ones and on a global rather than domestic scale' (Feng 2018a), we build on Economy's (2018) observation that one of the 'great paradoxes' of China today involves 'Xi Jinping's effort to position himself as a champion of globalisation, while at the same time restricting the free flow of capital, information, and goods between China and the rest of the world' (Economy 2018, x).

In light of the absence of an official map, this work considers key ideas relating to China's geopolitical expansion via the BRI in terms of so-called sovereignty regimes – the idea that various practices of authority and control emanating originally from states take different geographical shapes (*classic* as strictly territorial, *integrative* as expansionist/cooperative-territorial, *imperialist* as annexationist, and *globalist* as hegemonic/soft power/transactional over space/without borders or boundaries). Conflicts arise when a state, such as China, finds itself caught between the operational imperatives of multiple regimes. By identifying the current sovereignty dynamics raised by the BRI in light of the relevant, yet markedly distinctive historical experience of the Marshall Plan, this work can be used as a model for understanding how China's current leadership is managing the debate of simultaneously protecting 'strong borders' yet also promoting a policy of 'going out'.

To do this, we first introduce the concept of sovereignty regimes to explore the main question addressed in this paper: how can China as a modern state defend its borders as its main priority yet also support a growing role for itself

and other Chinese actors in the world at large? This question has become imperative partly because China's economic growth, the main concern of China's government, increasingly depends on external linkages and partly because China's businesses, like those worldwide, increasingly view the world as their oyster. Inevitably, however, this creates a tension between a deep-seated commitment to territorial sovereignty, on the one hand, and an as yet inchoate need to extend influence and control beyond that very territory, on the other.

Second, we consider the geopolitical thinking associated with the BRI. Third, we consider the geopolitical architecture of the Marshall Plan as a way of interpreting the political-economic implications of the BRI, and how the former provides a useful entrée into understanding China's sovereignty regimes dilemma today. If the projected multi-project, investment initiatives associated with Chinese-led BRI projects come to fruition, by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (Gokkon 2018; Hillman 2018) and Xi's target date for 'turning China into a global power' (Legarda and Nouwens 2018), it would represent an amazing expansion of Chinese influence and control around the world. But what sort of expansion would this be?

## Sovereignty Regimes

'Sovereignty regimes' constitute a framework for explaining the principal ways in which sovereignty is currently practiced, taking into account the comparative strength of centralised state authority and the degree to which such authority is consolidated in state territoriality. While matching China to one of the four (idealised) types of sovereignty regimes – *classic*, *imperialist*, *integrative*, and *global* (See: Agnew 2018, 161–165; Agnew 2005) – is not the aim of this project, such a framework is meant to highlight the different shapes sovereignty can take given the uncertain trajectory of China's handling of sovereignty. That the BRI cannot yet be characterised by any single governance framework, and given that the BRI is not officially mapped, cartographic fuzziness is working to the advantage of leaders in Beijing and continues to drive interest in how to make sense of Chinese leadership's strategic 'brand' (Lee 2019). Addressing the still-evolving BRI through the sovereignty regimes framework helps to chart out four possible directions the Chinese state can take as the CCP attempts to navigate the fine line of altering a global system it views as overly western, while simultaneously trying to appease claims of Chinese neo-imperialism.

The classic regime is similar to 'the doctrine of mercantilism in its totalising of territorial borders and its emphasis on central state regulation of all transactions entering and leaving the state's home territory' (Agnew 2018, 162). Up until the early 2000s, following China's entry into the World Trade Organization, which raised the question of China being a 'responsible stakeholder' in the political realm as its geo-economic interests began forming

connections beyond China's borders, China embodied the classic sovereignty regime with 'both despotic and infrastructural power still largely deployed within a bounded state territory' (Agnew 2005, 445). The USSR also exemplified many of the tenets of the classic regime. The imperialist regime, can be viewed as the opposite of the classic version in that it 'emphasises hierarchy in world politics but with networked reach over space increasingly supplementing or replacing direct territorial control' (Agnew 2018, 162). This regime type questions central state authority, 'because of external dependence and manipulation as well as corruption and chronic mismanagement' and relies on 'the assent and cooperation of local elites' (Agnew 2005, 445). Regions such as Latin America, which have had a historically dependent political-economic status with the Global North exemplify this regime.

The third regime – integrative – highlights the overlapping nature of sovereignty 'relating to the coexistence between different levels or tiers of government and the distinctive functional areas that are represented differentially' (Agnew 2018, 163) through different national, subnational and local scales. Best exemplified by the European Union, the integrative regime represents an at times 'politically unclassifiable entity that challenges existing state sovereignty in functionally complex and often times non-territorial ways' (Agnew 2005, 445). The final regime – the globalist regime – can be understood as 'effective sovereignty exercised by...(a geopolitical hegemon)...within and beyond its nominal national boundaries and through international institutions within which it is particularly influential' (Agnew 2005, 445). This regime is exemplified by the United States since the end of World War II and Britain in the 1800s. The globalist sovereignty regime attempts to enrol other states into a hegemon's regime through free-willed participation, and is noteworthy because it encapsulates the idea that sovereignty is borderless (i.e. global). Interpreting these four regimes highlights the sovereignty challenges and contradictions presented by the growth and expansion of the BRI.

We argue that the driving impetus for the BRI involves a) realising the 'China Dream,' b) improving China's international economic connectivity and c) enhancing China's global infrastructural investment and trade. These factors reflect, China's desire to regain its historic centrality in world affairs (*imperialist* regime); China's desire to address its humiliation by prior foreign invasion and humiliation (*classic* regime); and China's aspirational determination to address its current state of being surrounded by US allies in Asia today by attempting to enrol neighbouring and other states (*globalist* regime) via the BRI (infrastructural) and AIIB (financial) institutions.

### ***Using Sovereignty Regimes to Interpret the BRI***

Using the sovereignty regimes framework directly addresses the geopolitical contradictions that the Chinese government faces as it seeks to expand its influence beyond China's borders while adhering to the framework of

a centralised state. We build on Callahan's call to view the type of connectivity represented by the BRI as 'more than an issue of the 'hardware' of physical infrastructure...it is also a 'software' issue of the connectivity of ideas, institutions, and behaviour in diplomacy itself' (Callahan 2016, 226).

Considering the BRI framework in terms of sovereignty regimes is especially timely. The BRI's expansion beyond East Asia has sprouted important debates that are shaping geopolitics today. Political debates relating to Chinese leadership's position towards sovereign maritime claims and the fear of financial indebtedness on the part of countries receiving Chinese financing are shaping the way in which Chinese interests are viewed geopolitically. The current US administration is helping to roll back its own global influence (See Stephens 2018). This equates to 'leaving the field open' for China to shape the BRI. The US retreat has given Chinese geopolitical activity – and its dealing with sovereignty issues – more visibility. For instance, managing the tensions between Chinese territorial and maritime claims stemming from the June 2016 international arbitral tribunal of the 'South China Sea Case' registered by the Philippine government (See, e.g. Rolf and Agnew 2016), along with the difficulty of protecting the lives of Chinese workers in BRI-related infrastructure projects in Pakistan (See, e.g. Small 2015), highlight the varied and contested nature of contemporary Chinese sovereignty.

China's response to the 'South China Sea Case' highlights China's challenge of attempting to balance the reality of a classic sovereignty regime with its aspirational goal of introducing a new a globalist sovereignty regime. Such an aspirational goal itself is also timely given the US globalist retreat on many fronts. Scholarship emerging within the last 3 years suggests that Chinese government actors' framing of the BRI is much broader (and less bounded) than a Eurasia-African infrastructural connectivity project described by many accounts suggests (Cheng, Song, and Huang 2017; Huang 2016; Rolland 2017). We argue that the BRI is a political economic encapsulation of Chinese leadership's desire to manage these tensions by promoting a new geopolitical identity for itself – a new, aspirational *globalist* sovereignty regime identity. But is such an arrangement even possible/sustainable? To answer this question we consider the BRI in terms of each of the four sovereignty regime types.

### ***The BRI as a Globalist, No-Borders Sovereignty Regime?***

Perhaps because of the absence of an official map delimiting the BRI as a 'Eurasia and Africa-only' political economic project, rhetoric surrounding this initiative has already adopted an borderless/expansionist flavour 'to include a "Pacific Silk Road", a 'Silk Road on Ice' that crosses the Arctic Ocean and a 'Digital Silk Road' through cyberspace' (Economist 2018a). The globalist sovereignty regime places



emphasis on the lack of borders and on the willing enrolment of participants into a hegemon's global vision. Key terms such as 'belt' and 'road' are intended to connect large swaths of territory – and may serve to encourage BRI participant countries to coordinate their activities in a borderless fashion. Conceptualising the Chinese state as the hegemon, the BRI has been variously referred to as: a 'Geo-Functionalist Institutional Project' (Kaplan 2017), an 'alternative idea showing how the common space of international politics could be organised in the future' (Godehardt 2016, 5), as 'a possibly unique opportunity to reassert itself [China] at the centre of regional, if not world affairs' (Beeson 2017, 567), and as 'the means to the much larger end of promoting China's new vision of global governance' (Callahan 2016, 226).

One of the main challenges facing the BRI developing into a globalist sovereignty regime relates to the current limited importance of the Chinese renminbi as a world currency (Smith 2018). The acceptance and broad use of the US dollar after WWII played a key role in helping the US craft a globalist regime. However, given the nascent stage of the BRI (only 6 years old) coupled with this initiative's backing by financial mechanisms including the well-funded, multi-lateral AIIB and the Silk Road Fund, and considering the projected expenditures on all BRI-related projects estimated to reach as high as US\$1 trillion, the geopolitical importance of China's renminbi as a global currency is likely to rise over time. Should all the BRI projects come to fruition, they will cumulatively amount to a much larger financial initiative than the Marshall Plan. Another implicit and inherent difficulty surrounding the deployment of BRI as a globalist regime attractive to China's neighbours is trying to convince participant countries that this initiative is in fact *globalist* in nature as has been stated explicitly by China's leadership (e.g., Xi 2017). The challenge, therefore, that Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) need to address for China to realise its BRI initiative as a truly globalist regime involves confronting the contemporary reality that 'the expansion and sustainability of mobilities across and between ... (e.g. Chinese and Central Asian) states requires the region's borders to act more as bridgeheads of connection and development than sites of tension and mechanisms of political leverage' (Diener 2015, 377).

Regional cooperation – broadly defined as the building of consensus via rules and participation – is the hallmark of the *globalist* sovereignty regime. Such cooperation, however, is complicated by the particularities of the location-specific factors surrounding Chinese actors in relation to Sinophobia in Mongolia (Jackson and Dear 2016), state formation in Nepal (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016), cross-border trade dynamics in Kyrgyzstan (Alff 2016), and anti-political and state-centric paradigm concerns in Myanmar (Kiik 2016). These pre-OBOR/pre-BRI studies underscore the long-standing historic anxieties present in societies near or neighbouring China and help to underscore the challenge that proponents of the 'BRI as globalist sovereignty regime' ideal



face as BRI affiliated projects move forward and seek to connect local success and development with Chinese cooperation and financing. For these reasons, it is still unclear if the BRI can/will evolve into a globalist regime.

In Mongolia, ‘anxieties about China’s economic influence...go beyond recent and contemporary political economic issues and are tied to memories of the Qing Dynasty’ (Jackson and Dear 2016, 343). Such historical concerns contribute to modern day worries over declining sovereignty, triggered by Chinese (and other) actors’ participation in Mongolia’s mining sector, and pose a significant roadblock towards the BRI evolving into a globalist sovereignty regime. In Nepal, while Chinese-funded infrastructure projects play a key role in helping the Nepali government solidify its authority and enhance national security, “these major new infrastructure projects are promised as the long-awaited vehicles that will finally deliver wealth and modernisation across Nepal, and yet similar promises have been made (and left unfulfilled) for decades’ (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016, 413). This history of unattained development promises deserves consideration and warrants pause amongst those who advocate that the BRI will develop into a globalist regime structure.

Other examples of Chinese commercial activity beyond China’s borders serve to question the overarching power of Chinese state sovereignty’s ability to enrol and entice people to accede to BRI institutions. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, Chinese ‘actors’ representations, discourses, and everyday practices’ including individual Chinese actors’ ‘flexible entrepreneurial strategies’ highlight the agency of individual, non-state players who play an important and significant role in Chinese-Kyrgyzstan cross-border trade dynamics (Alff 2016, 451). Such notions, together with the agency and power inherent in Myanmar’s nationalistic movements (Kiik 2016), suggest that the BRI plan has a complex array of social and political hurdles to address if the BRI is to find acceptance in China’s near-abroad regions. While these highlights serve to sharpen and better ground the current tensions working *against* the BRI clearly becoming a globalist sovereignty regime, such examples also suggest that there are a variety of political frameworks that are evolving near China, which might lead the BRI to developing into something other than an Imperialist regime.

Furthermore, many scholars of modern Eurasian states argue that ‘[r]ather than a collection of city-states surrounded by frontier lands over which imperial domains expand and contract, contemporary Central Eurasia is composed of states pursuing modernist ideals of territorial sovereignty’ (Akiner 2011). This fact, along with their respective and often divergent state building ideologies, raises both the prospect and problem of encouraging sustainable trans-regional exchange, mobility and trade between these states. In other words, for BRI to succeed as a globalist regime, China’s leadership not only has to tame its own highly-charged territorially-based identity, but it also has to help strengthen Central Asian states which are dealing with the complexities of classic

sovereignty issues in a post-Soviet era, including the threat/growth of Islamic terrorism (See, e.g. Economist 2018a).

A challenge inherent in China's vision to create a globalist regime alternative to the currently dominant US globalist regime lies in the Chinese government's difficulty in accepting that a degree of pluralism is needed for the globalist sovereignty regime to work. A truly globalist regime adapts in order for others to adopt its vision. Inserting official Xinhua news agency news stories into 200+ 'independent' Chinese-language publications globally (Feng 2018b), for example, is the antithesis of the tenets of this regime. To be fair, adaptation and learning how to operate in non-Chinese regions is a hallmark of Chinese entrepreneurial activity. Often times, one of the main factors driving Chinese entrepreneurial activity is the desire to move away from the dictates and constricting regulation of the Chinese state (See, i.e. Lampert et al. 2014). When, and if, Chinese entrepreneurs become a driving force in China's BRI push, then, at that point, the likelihood of a globalist regime arising will become more plausible. Furthermore, China's state owned enterprises (SOEs) challenge the sovereignty of other states by acting as the primary instrument for expanding and filling-in the BRI architecture. SOEs by definition are state directed and hence cannot be seen as pursuing their own objectives independent of state direction as in the conventional behaviour of capitalist firms that pursue profits wherever they may find them which is of the essence of the globalist regime. Unless SOEs are eventually displaced by non-state directed actors of multiple national origins they thus represent a quite clear example of the imperialist – not the globalist – regime.

The BRI encapsulates Chinese leadership's desire to manage the political economic tensions of promoting a new geopolitical identity for itself. However, as this section has shown, a myriad of ideological differences between China and its neighbours, to date, keep the shape of China's power as an *aspirational* globalist sovereignty regime.

### ***As an Integrative, Multi-Scalar Sovereignty Regime?***

Although less likely, the possibility of the BRI initiative being an *integrative* sovereignty regime, deserves some consideration. This regime allows for the 'coexistence between different levels...of government and the distinctive functional areas that are represented differentially across the different levels' (Agnew 2005, 445). Such a framework could range from BRI-wide to Chinese-national to subnational or regional political organisations. While it is true that China is currently governed by an assemblage of political actors – the increasing consolidation of power by Xi Jinping himself (Economy 2018) suggests that this framework may not align with the policy goals and national vision of China's current leadership.

While the BRI places priority on ‘Asian regionalism through policy coordination, road connection, trade facilitation, currency exchange, and communication of public opinions’, according to some scholars, such integration is seen first and foremost as benefitting China’s own development (Liu in Ye 2015, 220). Other examples of prior Asian super-governmental structures (i.e. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have not often included East Asian states in their framework’s vision. While, the AIIB could represent early elements of an integrative regime – allowing different, non-Chinese government actors a role in creating the BRI, the form that BRI is currently taking, however, suggests that this initiative is not moving in such a direction to date. Likewise, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is an economic, political and security alliance between China and key Central Asian States, may hint at a new surge of Eurasian multi-lateralism and multi-level governance, however, with its headquarters in Beijing and with China as its most influence member, the SCO to date is heavily influential by leadership in Beijing. So while, Chinese government actors liberally use the term ‘win-win’ to describe joint ventures and international loan-for-resources arrangements, the reciprocity of respect between CCP actors and those from other regions and other scales is doubtful at best given the historical embeddedness of Chinese leadership’s view of China as occupying a central position in the geography of world power.

Instead the BRI’s ‘emphasis on the establishment of cross-border connections between all of China’s variously defined regions and neighbours beyond PRC borders’ (Yeh and Wharton 2016, 308) is an explicit attempt for Beijing to ‘purposefully rescale statehood to address its deficiency in developing the western region, and creates an inter-scalar institutional framework that integrates...(other Chinese sub-national regions)...into a transnational economy’ (Yeh and Wharton 2016, 309). Ultimately, however, ‘[a]ll of these connections help secure state control on China’s borders while simultaneously facilitating outward expansion of industry and investment, helping China move up the value chain through rescaling the state and through the embodied practices of migrant labourers’ (Yeh and Wharton 2016, 309). Such integration, therefore, emphasises Chinese agency and the strengthening of Chinese state sovereignty. The premise that participation by other state actors in the BRI and interaction with the CCP, equates to mutual exchange and mutual economic benefit cannot be presumed. Chinese industrial overcapacity, which is often driven by key industrial sectors guided by China’s State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), acts a guiding (and controlling) force in relation to the CCP’s vision for Chinese national economic growth. In all cases, economic integration, involving Chinese loans and/or investment ultimately seeks to add to Chinese control. Such a reality suggests that the likelihood of

an integrative sovereignty regime – one in which power is shared among multiple and varied levels, is not very likely.

Mutual exchange, so far, has proved frustrating for some states seeking to increase knowledge about how Chinese society and businesses operate. Gao Bingchen, a Canadian-Chinese columnist, cites the expansion of Chinese state media beyond China's borders as being indicative of the difficulties involved with mutual exchange with the CCP – 'the biggest problem is the lack of reciprocity. Western society helps Chinese culture and content by freely disseminating it, but China is completely closed off to content from Western countries' (Gao in Feng 2018b). That the sharing of *information* by the West into China is limited and filtered, suggests that a BRI with truly shared governance function among its 80+ participant states is not yet realistic. We therefore consider the integrative regime the *least* likely of all four sovereignty regimes because power sharing (a key tenet of the integrative regime) between the CCP and other actors has so far proved elusive. To date Chinese leadership's concern for centralised state control over territorial sovereignty does not lend itself to sharing authority or control. The *globalist* sovereignty regime, to which President Xi publicly aspires China to embody, seems hampered by several of the same obstacles (i.e. challenges reaching mutually agreeable cross-border connections, lack of reciprocal information sharing between China and BRI-participant countries) that diminish the likelihood of an *integrative* sovereignty regime accurately describing identity the nascent BRI.

### ***As a Classic Territorially-Bounded Sovereignty Regime?***

There is an inherent paradox and difficulty in developing BRI into a globalist sovereignty regime given Chinese leadership's track record of deploying a *classic* sovereignty regime (with the exception of Hong Kong and Taiwan). Classic sovereignty is the regime most often invoked when depicting traditional state sovereignty. This is a regime in which 'both despotic and infrastructural power (are) still largely deployed within a bounded state territory and (in which) exists a high degree of effective central state political authority' (Agnew 2005, 445). Classic sovereignty is often easily understood – power and control are limited to the geographic boundaries of a state. The July 2016 ruling in favour of the Philippines by the international arbitral tribunal in the 'South China Sea Case' highlights China's deep concern about maintaining and reclaiming national territory while seeking to be a responsible geopolitical stakeholder (Hayton 2017). By viewing itself as the rightful sovereign authority over the South China Sea, Chinese leadership is signally its ongoing preoccupation with traditional conceptions of control over state territory.

China's humiliation at the hands of foreigners from the 1840s to the 1940s – specifically the 'carving up' of China's territory ('geobody') by European and other powers – is a central part of the official history taught

in China's schools. This humiliation serves as a reminder of the subservience that follows from a failure to respond adequately to foreign threats and to defend China's borders against colonial dismemberment. Beginning in the late 1940s, Mao Zedong restored Chinese national sovereignty from foreign colonial powers by unifying the country – a clear move in the direction of the classic sovereignty regime. Mao's reputation for ruthlessness towards his own people – leading to the great famine – has led to the belief that 'Mao turned on the Chinese people' (Shapiro 2018).

As a result, the growth of the Chinese economy since the late 1970s has strengthened China's geopolitical presence as a state in support of classic state sovereignty. The continuing in-between status of Hong Kong and Taiwan as claimed but not fully controlled territories (albeit in very different ways) (Callahan 2009; Wang 2014), serves in part as a reminder of China's ongoing territorial uncertainty and, likewise serves to fortify Chinese calls for increased nationalist delineations in terms of territorial border enforcement. Until the early 2010s, China has been well known for its 'non-interference' policies in the geopolitical arena. Recently, such defense of classic sovereignty has come to the fore when Chinese President Xi Jinping commented to US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis that China would 'not move one inch' with regards to its claims in the South China Sea (Clover and Jung-A 2018). Such a statement reinforces the tensions inherent in the BRI and the difficulties other parties may face when considering whether or not to participate in this initiative.

The notion of classic sovereignty is further complicated by the CCP's ambition to use its powers to solidify its influence within its borders while also expanding its influence and reach internationally – the idea is that, unlike Mao, 'Xi will turn the Chinese people on the world' (Shapiro 2018). So the Chinese government's borrowing of US language, 'win-win' for example, manifests itself as the use of Chinese labour and Chinese products in target aid/investment countries (Yeh and Wharton 2016: 294 & 301). 'Win-win', then, does not connote an open market, globalist framework associated with the Washington Consensus, which has historic roots in the Marshall Plan and its emphasis on institution building and the diffusion of common norms of governance based on American practices. This belies the story told about 'non-interference' (classic sovereignty) by Chinese leaders. In addition, Beijing is using its experience of 'Going West', which represents an effort to invest in and promote the economic development of China's western regions (i.e. Xinjiang and Tibet) – as a means of 'Going Out', which represents investing excess Chinese capital and capacity beyond China's borders (see Yeh and Wharton 2016). The premise of using knowledge gained from a classic sovereignty regime to improve the successful outcome of an aspirational globalist regime is contradictory at its core. How long can this contradiction prevail? The historical and cultural weight of a strong, centralised Chinese state casts into doubt Chinese leadership's ability to manage the

political and economic tensions associated with China's growth via the BRI using the *globalist* sovereignty regime identity.

### ***Challenges to a Mixed Classic and Globalist Sovereignty Regime***

The BRI has already extended beyond and moved past the Eurasian regional theatre – including into regions such as Africa and Latin America (See, i.e. Klinger and Narins 2018)., In so doing, balancing notions of classic (territorial) sovereignty together with aspirations of leading a globalist (borderless) sovereignty regime, is complicated by multiple geographic dilemmas. For example, today China is surrounded by states that have security relationships with the United States – '[s]o China's sense of insecurity is not paranoia, it really *is* ringed by US allies' (Miller 2017, 246). Therefore, the expansion of the BRI beyond the often-discussed Eurasian infrastructure projects, would in a sense represent an act of geographic 'national liberation' – a breaking free from being cordoned off from the rest of the world. The motivation for such an act of national liberation, can be viewed as driven by deeply embedded concerns for classic sovereignty.

Passing beyond the barriers of US allies would allow for the projection and the validity of the Chinese state within the world system. Of course, such an act of geographic liberation may also translate into Chinese sovereignty being viewed as more globalist in nature. We argue that the classic strain of sovereignty appears to outweigh the globalist tendencies. To support this line of thought, we point to Jones (2017) who argues that a combination of territorial sovereignty, maritime interests and power allocation embodies China's 'escalating contempt for international standards' – a hallmark of the globalist sovereignty regime. While tempting to consider at a theoretical political level, maintaining a classic sovereignty regime while promoting a new, aspirational *globalist* identity, seems fraught with challenges given the contemporary turning point in Chinese leaders' desire to be a centre of political control.

### ***As a Neo-Tributary System Imperialist Regime?***

Leadership in Beijing may also be shaping its new geopolitical vision around the principles aligned with an imperialist sovereignty regime. Unlike the globalist and classic sovereignty regimes, the imperialist variety relies on a 'neo-tributary framework', which invokes the Chinese historic tributary tradition as a means of shaping China's contemporary global power strategy (Pan and Lo 2015). The Chinese saying 'everything under the heavens' (*tian xia*) highlights China's historical view of the world (French 2017) and China's experience with 'infrastructural connectivity' is offered to weaker neighbours as both a form of assistance and as a form of power. The neo-tributary perspective identifies: Chinese exceptionalism, trade and diplomacy linkages,



cultural assimilation, and image building as a way of acknowledging the needs and aspirations of China's contemporary diplomacy from a non-Western, Chinese perspective. The contemporary relevance of the neo-tributary perspective as an aid in situating China's place in the world, aligns well with 'China's traditional view of itself as a cultural core expanding outward....the relation between the centre and the margins remains somewhat more fluid and quasi-imperial in the context of China' (Billé 2016a, 4).

Deeply embedded in the imperialist sovereignty regime is a belief in and adherence to *soft power* (Pan and Lo 2015, 2–6). Chinese views on soft power, however, are conceptualised more broadly than Western views to encompass 'not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in the multi-lateral organisations' (Kurlantzick 2007, 6). All these tie into a networked-reach over space framework increasingly supplanting or replacing direct territorial control (Agnew 2018, 163). Managing the paradox inherent in China being a beneficent lender to developing countries and, in so doing, possibly creating dependencies that may allow for 'gross manipulation, albeit monetary rather than military' (Hunter in Pan and Lo 2015) highlights the tensions and complications arising from this neo-tributary system. China's 'peaceful rise' even if using 'peaceful means' does not preclude coercion (See, e.g. Seppänen 2017).

Furthermore, 'China's fixation on its cultural, not merely political-military strength further lends credence to the validity of the tribute system as the best way to ensure that it is able to maintain national face and sense of overall superiority' (Ho 2015, 8). These factors suggest that designing and maintaining BRI as an imperialist sovereignty regime will be more likely than its institutionalisation as a globalist regime (Frankopan 2018). This regime classification aligns well with China's psychological worldview of interactions between states being understood as relational and bilateral (Beeson 2017).

Recent activity of Chinese SOEs with regards to Eurasian infrastructure affiliated projects further supports the BRI as aligning with the *imperialist* more than globalist sovereignty regime. Characterised by 'networked reach over space as well as direct territorial control', this regime entails the deployment of sovereignty as being necessarily tied to the 'dependent political-economic status that many states endure' (Agnew 2005, 445). In 2017, for instance, the Sri Lankan government, having taken on \$1.5 billion of Chinese debt for the construction of a sea port at the southeastern town of Hambantota, decided to grant control of the port to Beijing. The 70 percent controlling interest that China now has in the port for the next 99 years has been described as 'a strategic move to



advance (China's)... One Belt One Road goals, something the Chinese firm at the centre of the deal has been explicit about' (Robertson 2018). This deal has raised concerns about the eventual arrival of Chinese naval vessels – a move that would support the use of the imperialist sovereignty regime to characterise the BRI. It is becoming increasingly clear that China's immediate neighbours, especially smaller states (e.g. Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam), are also becoming concerned about the degree to which the financial indebtedness may compromise their state's sovereignty as infrastructural projects related to the BRI continue to progress (Miller 2017).

Another reason pointing to the BRI developing along the lines of an imperialist regime – as opposed to the widely marketed, 'win-win', globalist regime – is that 'a modernist conception of borders and sovereignty that makes any prospect of contemporary trans-Eurasian trade contingent on unprecedented levels of regional cooperation' (Diener 2015, 377) will occur only in the most ideal and optimistic scenarios. To date, Eurasian regional cooperation has proved elusive. Tensions over Chinese cross border investment/trade efforts with Kazakhstan (Feng and Foy 2017), Chinese investment in Siberian real-estate (Clover and Zhang 2018) and Pakistan urban infrastructure (Page and Shah 2018), the efficacy of infrastructure projects with Malaysia (Palma 2018) and Sri Lanka (Robertson 2018), along with maritime and territorial rights with Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states (Miller 2017) have all called into question the mutual benefit of the BRI. In addition, rather than promoting a 'community with a shared future for mankind', (Kynge 2018) the BRI has been recently characterised as 'first and foremost a China-centric effort' (Hillman in Kynge 2018).

According to a recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, of the contractors assigned to work on China-financed transportation infrastructure projects 'in 34 Asian and European countries, 89 percent were Chinese' (Kynge 2018). Data such as these align most closely with the imperialist sovereignty regime. Of the three sovereignty regimes 'challenging' the globalist regime as a potential explanatory concept for the emergent BRI, the imperialist regime represents a direct challenge to Chinese leadership's ability to manage the political and economic tensions associated with the Chinese state promoting a new geopolitical, borderless identity for itself, e.g. the *globalist* sovereignty regime. In the case of the Marshall Plan, most post-WWII Western European countries were eager to cooperate with the US government because US grants were given in a political economic atmosphere of post-war governmental as much as infrastructural rebuilding (Agnew and Entrikin 2004). The following section compares and contrasts the Marshall Plan with the BRI in an attempt to clarify the overarching geopolitical uncertainty associated with the later.

## Analysing the BRI

### *Comparing and Contrasting the Marshall Plan to the BRI*

Recent scholarship has drawn clear connections between China's 'Going West' initiative within China and its 'Going Out' initiative beyond China's borders (Yeh and Wharton 2016). In this regard, the BRI represents a contemporary geopolitical effort on the part of the Chinese leadership to modernise western Chinese regions under the Han Chinese view of development. But this ongoing historically rooted set of discourses and actions highlights the continuing role of Chinese exceptionalism and hegemony in contemporary geopolitics beyond China's territorial borders. This reality gives further credibility to the explanatory power of the imperialist regime in explaining China's efforts in relation to the BRI. In order to better situate the BRI in contemporary geopolitics, we undertake a comparison of the US Marshall Plan and the BRI.

Broad political economic comparisons of the Marshall Plan and the BRI (e.g., Economist 2018b; Lairson 2018; Tiezzi 2014) have placed emphasis on both plans 'being put forward at times when the world system was not functioning properly' (Shen and Chan 2018). Both initiatives must be understood as entailing a mix of economic and geopolitical objectives, which together can be seen as pro-active responses by strong state actors to major sea changes in the geopolitical landscape at the time of their formation. The Marshall Plan was the 'prototype' for the globalist regime after the Second World War and its emphasis on governance more than just infrastructure helped to consolidate the staying power of the Western-led world order to this day. Although seeking a different pathway, we argue that the evolution of the BRI is happening in a geopolitical system that has been indelibly shaped by the Marshall Plan.

Whereas the key geopolitical driver forging the creation of the Marshall Plan was the rebuilding of a shattered Europe following World War II in an effort to thwart Europe from falling under Soviet domination, at the broadest levels these factors serve as a reminder of the contested nature of Chinese sovereignty, especially in an era where economic clout is enabling it to question the dominant world order as crafted by the American and European governments and that has been in place since 1944 (See Table 1).

Comparing the Marshall Plan with the BRI highlights the ways in which contemporary geopolitics is shifting away from a US/European-based international regulatory framework towards a more Chinese-influenced world order (Frankopan 2018, See Table 2). Such a comparison also serves to highlight the importance of sovereignty regimes in a dynamic geopolitical system that often bends to those state actors who have a monopoly on both infrastructural and despotic power (See, e.g. Mann 1984). Although the Chinese government does not favour the comparison between these two initiatives, since it views the

**Table 1.** Sovereignty regimes.

	STATE TERRITORIALITY	
	Consolidated	Open
Stronger CENTRAL STATE AUTHORITY	Classic	Globalist
Weaker	Integrative	Imperialist

Source: Agnew 2005, 445.

Marshall Plan as a contributing factor in the containment the Soviet Union, even though it never set out to do that, the main geopolitical motives of each plan have and will continue to have global implications. Framing ideas found in both initiatives include: (1) open-membership to *interested and willing* parties, (2) the global use and adoption of American and Chinese products and ideas, respectively, and (3) a strong and clear emphasis on multilateralism (Marshall 1947; Agnew and Entrikin 2004, 18; Xi 2013a, 2013b).

As with many comparative examinations of U.S. and Chinese political frameworks and ideologies, understanding the differences inherent in each of these two countries' largest geopolitical benefit plans serves to clarify the ways in which the controlling elements of geopolitics emanate from economic strength and, to borrow a term from Myers (2018) are marketed politically as 'geographically inclusive platforms'. The sovereignty regimes premise – that simultaneously employing some combination of the four sovereignty types (classic, integrative, imperial, and global) leads to tensions for a state – serves to question the geopolitical inclusivity of such platforms. In the case of the Marshall Plan, its focus on using US dollars to stimulate European industrial recovery was also directed at stimulating overall US economic recovery through massive exports of steel and other capital goods in the aftermath of the Second World War and to challenge the threat from domestic support for Communist parties allied with the Soviet Union in countries such as France and Italy. In the case of the BRI, because of the complexities inherent in China's political framework, particularly its reliance on SOEs and the use of Chinese labour, the absence of something as compelling as rebuilding a world region following a major war casts doubt on the inclusivity of all parties/players that adhere to this initiative.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of a clear path towards a globalist sovereignty regime for the BRI at this time, we recognise that China is using its strengths in infrastructural economics to its advantage in a way that is reminiscent of the US government's Marshall Plan in the 1940s-50s. Contemporary Chinese leadership's use of the BRI to 'facilitate the opening up of foreign countries to Chinese investments' (Seppänen 2017, 15) across Eurasia, Africa and beyond is similar to the US Marshall Plan's intent to stimulate 'European economic growth to help American exports' (Agnew and



Table 2. Geopolitical framing of the Marshall Plan and the Belt Road Initiative.

Plan Factor	Marshall Plan	Belt Road Initiative
Mode/Amount of Capital Transfer	Predominantly grants (\$110-\$130 billion in 2018 dollars)	Predominantly loans and private investment (Precise amounts unknown – estimates range from \$56 to \$110 billion by the end of 2016)
Core Regional Focus	Transatlantic	Nominally, Eurasia and Africa
Lender's Intent	Developing a <i>systemic institutional mechanism</i> – using the US\$, (the currency that emerged dominant from WWII), for the macroeconomic integration of Europe and the US (led to the Bretton Woods monetary system)	<i>Economic investment</i> (domestic & transnational) for Chinese industrial overcapacity <i>Infrastructural development</i> (To date the US\$, much more so than the Chinese RMB, is the de facto currency of infrastructural finance projects, including those initiated/managed by Chinese actors)
Geopolitical Architect	United States Government	People's Republic of China Government
Key Geopolitical Driver	Rebuilding a shattered Europe & helping US business. Fear of Communism's influence in Western Europe	Realizing the 'Chinese Dream' Economic Connectivity Infrastructural Investment Trade
Key Geopolitical Functions	Prototype for the globalist sovereignty regime after WWII with a main emphasis on governance	A still evolving mix of diverging governance frameworks with a main emphasis on infrastructure (with political ramifications) ?
Targeted Sovereignty Regime	Globalist	
Main Operational Participants	US and European Governments, US & European Firms	Chinese government; governments and private firms from 86 countries (as of May 2018)
Participant countries' willingness to receive political/economic assistance	Very willing	Mixed (range of willing to cautious to disengaging)
Relevant development ideas/models at time of inception	North-North development Western-based development	South-South development China's model of development The 'Asian Century'

Entrikin 2004, 3). That both government-led initiatives have been marketed as benevolent benefit plans while embedding political economic ‘returns’ for the plans’ designers, is a hallmark of powerful, globalist states in contemporary geopolitics (See, e.g. Ye 2015).

In terms of each initiative’s geographic scope, the Marshall Plan, although nominally open to all former combatant countries across Europe, was targeted towards building transatlantic political and economic ties with an emphasis on United States–Western European ties. Likewise, while equally open to all interested member states, the BRI has placed initial emphasis on China’s political and economic linkages with Eurasia and Africa, but has also been *intentionally crafted as an ambiguously defined program in terms of its geographic scope* (hence ‘the missing map’) and has already expanded beyond the original Eurasian-African routes. In this sense, the BRI is providing the foundation for the promotion of global trade and newly crafted institutional ties – chief among which is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which as of May 2018 includes 86 member states as far off as Papua New Guinea and Kenya (South China Morning Post 2018). Through the BRI, China’s current leadership has also expressed its desire to be more broad reaching to ‘clear investment and trade hurdles with the related countries, enhancing cooperation on agriculture, manufacturing, environmental protection and tourism’ (Wu 2017).

Apart from the instability of each plan’s respective era, the ‘dollar gap’ in the core region of each plan’s target area, Europe and Eurasia, respectively, has created the conditions for financial respect, and political tolerance (to a degree) among would-be recipient states. In post WWII Europe, for example, ‘many countries did not have enough hard currency to purchase the food and fuel they needed to import for reconstruction’ (Leffler 2018, 171–172). Likewise, current geopolitics sees China as being the only country in the contemporary world system that has a simultaneous combination of a strong authoritarian government and a global-scale economic presence/influence (Feng 2018a). Ironically, European states (the main targets of the Marshall Plan) are also among the group of countries that Chinese government authorities are actively courting as BRI participants precisely because these states are eager to benefit from Chinese investment. Such economic opportunism on the part of some BRI-participant states may lead to political acceptance of a more Chinese-based geopolitical system. This suggests the possibility of the imperialist regime being an apt descriptor of the still nascent BRI.

### ***Targets/Goals of the BRI***

From a geopolitical perspective, although China’s leadership initially emphasised the BRI as a Eurasian- and African-focused economic and infrastructural connectivity initiative, many scholars have argued convincingly that the BRI has and will have worldwide impact and influence (Economist 2018a;

Godehardt 2016; Jones 2017; Kaplan 2017; Myers 2018). This expansion of influence beyond the initial target regions points to the need to consider the BRI as potentially developing into a globalist (borderless) regime – especially given the official ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘win-win’ rhetoric that surrounds official Chinese government announcements related to the BRI. As has been highlighted in this paper, the BRI is a multi-layered political-economic project that places more emphasis on attempting to engage political actors into a sovereignty regime in which Beijing eventually plays a more central role in the design and authority/control over global rulemaking. Depending on the level of ‘willing participation vs. coercion’ on the part of non-Chinese participant actors, an eventual BRI framework could take the form of an imperialist regime but it could also take the form of a more globalist regime.

We argue that a classic sovereignty regime of overt territorial control is not the ultimate goal of the BRI. If anything, BRI infrastructure, which in its East-West expanse will connect China with Europe, can be viewed as the ‘missing third’ of a tripartite, northern hemispheric-spanning, set of pairings that connects the world’s main political economic centres: (1) US-Europe (NATO); (2) Asia-US (potentially the TPP); and now Europe and Asia (BRI) (See Beeson 2017).

The globalist aspirations of the BRI have impelled Beijing to emphasise Chinese exceptionalism in a number of ways to reinforce the legitimacy of the BRI project. To keep the system as flexible and open as possible, fuzziness – not maps – is what is being distributed by China’s leadership. This fuzziness includes a host of economic incentives (attractive financing, technical help, promises for more loans) (e.g. Brautigam 2009; Narins 2016). Already, today, governments in European countries to South Africa to Southeast Asia are eager to be part of the BRI and to receive Chinese funds.

The cartographic uncertainty of a map-less BRI may generate the foundation for China’s current Xi administration to create an expansionist, global alternative to the current, Western-designed world order that has given rise to binaries such as Global North/Global South, East vs. West. China vs. US, etc. In this sense, the BRI, in principle offers the potential for positive, non-binary geopolitical outcomes. Our point is that the full/final shape of China’s new geopolitical identity, as represented by the BRI, is unknown and that there are a host of actors and factors that make the ‘BRI as globalist sovereignty regime’ a possibility but, at the same time, far from inevitable.

The idea of ‘cartographic anxieties’ has, since the term’s inception (Gregory 1994; Krishna 1994), focused on the fears and potential threats and damage caused by territorial borders as codified on a printed/published map. A watermarked map of China containing both Taiwan and disputed territories also claimed by India in the release of China’s new passport in 2012, along with Chinese maps of the South China Sea including disputed

islands claimed by mainland and insular Southeast Asian states (Fisher 2012 in Billé 2016b) are two examples that highlight the fears instigated by printed maps. The principle we wish to highlight here is of *an unknown sovereignty regime fostered in part by the absence* of an official BRI map. We term this unknown – ‘fuzziness’. Fuzziness with relation to the CCP’s cartographic depiction of the BRI connotes a geopolitical outcome which is not – at the current time necessarily viewed as beneficial or detracting from the current, Western-design world order – simply that the Chinese government is taking a ‘wait and see approach’ towards the codification of the BRI among the global community of nations.

More specifically, fuzziness, in this context, is defined by the intentional vagueness on the part of the CCP as to the geographic limits and boundaries of the BRI – an avoidance of the ‘cartographic aggression’ critics claim China is undertaking in the South China Sea (Billé 2016a, 11) – both as a means of allowing the project to potentially become *global* in reach and *globalist* in terms of how China deploys its sovereignty regime and, simultaneously, as a means of protecting China’s economic and political expansion options from direct, cartographically targetable criticism from Western and other actors. While this ‘missing from the map’ approach may more closely resemble the notion of ‘cartographic embrace’ – in that ‘all actors’ are potentially welcome to participate in the BRI – such a stance ‘can be even more threatening’ (Billé 2016b, 92), perhaps because of the implicit notion that the final territorial limitations of the BRI may be bigger than previously anticipated (i.e. global instead of confined to Eurasia and Africa).

### ***Challenges to the BRI as a Globalist Sovereignty Regime***

The way that the BRI is articulated by the Chinese government is as a system for and of mutual benefit for all of its participant countries and for the entire world (i.e. Lynch 2018). The problem with this projection of the BRI is that the way the Chinese Communist Party has treated other groups that do not follow the Chinese government’s directives ranging from Chinese political dissidents (i.e. Liu Xiaobo and Hu Jia) to countries in the South China Sea (i.e. the Philippines) who have overlapping claims to islands and waters in the region (See, i.e. Rolf and Agnew 2016) has not been conducted with utmost benevolence towards the ‘other’ (See Seppänen 2017).

In addition to the growing US-China geopolitical rivalry, in which US regulators increasingly seek to investigate and discredit BRI-related financing (see, e.g. Wildau 2018), the rise in importance of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as the vehicles through which Xi Jinping is promoting Chinese ‘self-reliance’ only serves to complicate notions that the BRI represents China’s international development strategy, namely ‘globalization 2.0’ (Aredy 2018). Xi’s recent use of the term ‘self-reliance’ in relation to the



larger role SOEs will play in guiding the Chinese economy, suggests a fuzziness – which, similar to the lack of an official BRI map – may be a way to ‘buy time’ to strategize the best approach to take for the still evolving BRI cohort of projects. The originally Maoist idea of self-reliance, emphasised ‘isolation from exploitative capitalist and western forces’ while Deng Xiaoping and others use of the term used the concept ‘to promote greater integration in the global economy’ (Wildau 2018). The recent CCP decision to insert the Communist Party into the by-laws of China’s largest corporations (Hughes 2017), represents another factor challenging the view of BRI as a potentially globalist enterprise. This decision is likely to increasingly bring Chinese non-state actors under the canopy of the Chinese government’s umbrella of power.

While such a new Chinese geopolitical identity would certainly represent a challenge and a change away from ‘the principles, norms, and values of the existing international order’, (Godehardt 2016, 9) having CCP leadership written into the by-laws of China’s largest firms represents a more classic sovereignty approach to political economics as opposed to a globalist approach. A globalist approach would see the Chinese government allowing Chinese firms to be more influenced by the rules of the market. A recent combination of privately owned and state-owned enterprises buying shares of large Chinese state-owned firms that are listing stock market shares are ‘blurring the line between private enterprises in China and SOEs’ (Sender 2017). The problem with this model (from a Western, liberal, free-market, perspective) is that ‘[r]ather than freeing up state enterprises to act more efficiently, the latest step move by Beijing is all about asking private companies to subsidise them’ (Sender 2017). From a political-economic perspective, such actions/behaviour represents the ‘latest sign of the Chinese Communist party extending its influence over China’s private sector’ (Sender 2017). This contrasts, with a key feature of the US globalist regime which has always encompassed a range of actors (Hollywood, Coca-Cola, Silicon Valley, Missionaries, etc.), not just the national government.

### ***Contradictions of Chinese Sovereignty, China’s SOEs, Private Sector in Relation to the BRI***

The development and deployment of investment and infrastructural connectivity programmes into BRI-affiliated states is characterised by contradictions. Such contradictions further complicate the sovereignty regime designation of China’s BRI. Although Western biases may suggest that Chinese SOEs are more likely to seek out investment locations in other authoritarian regimes, recent scholarship does not support such a claim – especially with regards to China’s National Oil Companies’ (NOCs) overseas foreign direct investments (OFCD) since 2006 (Chalmers and Mocker 2017).

Rather, China's NOCs – like NOCs from more developed countries and like private firms more broadly – seek out locations with fewer regulatory hurdles and a track-record of long-term regime stability. So, like Western firms and private Chinese firms, Chinese NOCs are 'more likely to make risk-averse location decisions that prioritise host-states with substantial controls over corruption, robust provisions for the rule of law, are stable over the long term, and allow for a more permissive regulatory environment' (Chalmers and Mocker 2017, 19). A key factor enabling China's NOCs to take such actions involves the CCP's willingness to shift 'the locus of risk away from Beijing and squarely into the firm itself' as outlined in the 2006 updates to Beijing's 'Going Out' policy (Chalmers and Mocker 2017, 19). While such a stance contradicts insertions of the CCP into China's largest firms, as mentioned earlier, it also suggests (the possibility, at least) that pathways other than a full-fledged imperialist sovereignty regime are conceivable for Chinese government-affiliated actors moving forward.

This contradiction raises the question: How can Beijing allow a loosening of control for Chinese firms beyond its borders and still maintain a high degree of economic and political authority over such firms and actors – along the lines of classic sovereignty – within its territorial boundaries? The emerging BRI relies on a combination of SOEs, private sector actors and individual Chinese actors who are taking the BRI at face value and are 'going out' on their own (Hancock 2017). Another contradiction involves the extent to which Chinese people can transcend their government in the sense that it was Americans – as much as the US government – that energised globalisation and created a truly *globalist* regime as we know it. Hollywood and US banks internationalising in the 1960s are two examples of agency beyond the state in the creation of the globalist regime that has come to characterise US sovereignty.

Likewise, recent deaths of Chinese workers in Pakistan highlight the conflicts at play over the workings of notions of *classic* vs. *globalist* state sovereignty in relation to the BRI. On the one hand China's contemporary political economic advance is centred around building Chinese classic sovereignty, strength, power and influence. On the other hand, Chinese sources have readily acceded/admitted to the reality that the BRI projects in Pakistan (projected to be valued at \$46 billion) will bring the deaths of Chinese labourers here (Basit 2018) as part of China's push to create a new geopolitical identity. In 2017, for instance, two Chinese citizens who were in Pakistan on business visas, were kidnapped and murdered in Quetta (Masood 2017). In 2018, three Chinese nationals were injured as they were travelling to a mineral project in Quetta (Wu 2018). These incidents suggest unease on the part of Balochi separatists who view Chinese participation in BRI-related Pakistani infrastructural projects as threatening. In short, limits to China's shaping the BRI into an alternative globalist regime appear to be numerous (and mounting).

## Conclusion

This paper addresses the overarching question: ‘How can China as a modern state defend its borders as its main priority yet also support a growing role for itself and other Chinese actors in the world at large?’ The answer to this question is for the CCP to maintain the status quo in its continued use of current maps, such as the new vertical map of China – a map that places the South China Sea and the islands in it – ‘in direct visual equivalence with the mainland’ (Billé 2016a, 9; see also Florcruz 2014), and to simultaneously leverage its strengths and experience in government-to-government deal making, entrepreneurial flexibility, learning, adaptation and innovativeness, infrastructural construction, and project finance in an effort to enrol other state actors into the still evolving BRI. That these projects and pathways have not been enshrined in an official Chinese cartographic statement can be understood as dually beneficial. First, the absence of cartographic limits/borders points to the continued expansion of the BRI series of initiatives and second, the absence of the full extent of the BRI projections and pathways may serve to lessen antagonism toward Chin by already weary neighbours and far-off rivals.

The lack of an official, empirically based Chinese-government BRI map creates a blank canvas onto which an aspirational/normative vision of a new Chinese geopolitical identity can be painted. Such an open, still undefined cartography represents the CCP’s attempt to encourage what it hopes will be a globalist regime that will evolve and develop naturally, without any pre-determined or pre-ordained political borders, boundaries or limits. As discussed in this paper, such hopes are complicated by an array of sovereignty-related factors – some historical (Mongolia), some related to nation-state making (Nepal), some ethno-political (Myanmar), and some related to the everyday practices of cross-border trade (Kyrgyzstan) that emanate from times and locations that are either beyond the control of or predate the current Chinese leadership.

China’s conflicting sovereignty dilemmas will affect the ability of BRI-participant countries to maintain their independent state identities. Given the increasingly leveraged economic position of many BRI-affiliated states, an implicit acceptance of Chinese political, national, regional and global imperatives may become more widely accepted/tolerated. The contemporary geopolitical significance of the BRI as compared with the Marshall Plan highlights the complexities in relation to sovereignty of the contemporary Chinese initiative. By considering the extent to which the BRI can be seen as providing the foundations for a new, alternative geopolitical identity to that associated with contemporary globalisation, this paper examines how Chinese actors are managing the apparent conflict between the traditional commitment to a highly territorialised sovereignty regime, including hostility to any sort of foreign interventions across borders, and the possibility that the BRI is a harbinger of a very different sovereignty regime with China at its centre.

The ‘fuzziness’ of the BRI initiative – that there is no official Chinese government BRI map – is suggestive of the rhetorical role of the BRI: only when precise delimitation becomes possible will we be able to see whether this is a new globalist, an imperialist, or an integrative project. In any of these cases, the first sign would have to be a clear abandonment (rather than renouncing) of the classic sovereignty regime that China seems intent on furthering (e.g. Xi’s speech to the Party Congress on October 18, 2017). Scholars such as Yeh and Wharton (2016) have suggested that ‘going west’ and ‘going out’ is a way for China to ‘square the circle’ between territorialised sovereignty and moving beyond be it into either imperialist, globalist or integrative regimes. With the increased centralisation of China’s power in Beijing under Xi Jinping, plus China’s global economic importance – a combination no other country currently has – the ‘fuzziness’ of the BRI initiative appears to be an effective way of encouraging a push for the further expansion of China’s sovereignty projections in the geopolitical arena without an *a priori* commitment to what geographical shape the future singular or combination of sovereignty regimes might take. Other powers, not least the United States, could profoundly affect the outcome depending on how they react to Chinese initiatives worldwide.

## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the following colleagues at the University at Albany, Department of Geography and Planning, for enabling us to dedicate significant time to complete this project: Youqin Huang, Ray Bromley, Catherine Lawson and Andrei Lapenas. We also wish to thank C.K. Lee at UCLA for sharing her insights on the nascent Belt Road Initiative.

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