

Introduction: The World Transformed – Grounding the Belt and Road Initiative

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The new geography of the Belt and Road Initiative

As China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) moves into a second decade, it has become a highly visible and at times contentious international cooperation and economic strategy intersecting and influencing planetary presents and futures. Announced in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI has been heralded as the single largest infrastructure project since the post-World War II Marshall Plan, with a scope and scale perhaps unprecedented in modern history (Ferdinand, 2016). The BRI's origins are often attributed to two overlapping interpretations.

The first interpretation is based on an economic logic, in which the Government of the People's Republic of China responded to the 2008 global financial crisis with a state-funded economic stimulus package (Tooze, 2018) that supported the large-scale reorganization of accumulation regimes (Jiang, 2015) and led to the exporting of China's so-called construction boom in the post-2008 period. This response to the financial crisis also coincided with China's existing and ongoing major regional development initiatives, such as the Great Western Development beginning in 1999, the Northeast Area Revitalization since 2003 and the Rise of Central China since 2006 (Liu and Liu, 2017). The construction boom from these earlier projects resulted in major oversupply and excess productive capacity in industrial sectors (Furlong, 2022), and the gradual decline in demand, also linked to the post-2008 financial crash in the European Union and the United States, eventually led to a contraction of China's exports. In light of these developments, the BRI has been understood as a major 'spatial fix' to capital's overaccumulation crisis in China (Harvey, 2016; Summers, 2016; Zhang, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Apostolopoulou, 2021a) due to its potential

Figure 0.1: Gates to the Allama Iqbal Industrial City Special Economic Zone in Pakistan, under construction



Source: Photograph by Jonathan Silver

to revitalize economic growth by facilitating geographical expansion and spatial reorganization.

The second interpretation is based on a geopolitical logic that sees the BRI as China's strategic attempt at (re)aligning global markets and international relations away from the dominance of the United States and its power in shaping the contemporary global order over the past few decades. This sits alongside a *longue durée* perspective in which the BRI is understood beyond immediate China-US relations but as part of a wider shift to global economic geography away from centuries anchored in the North Atlantic and toward the Pacific Ocean. In a geopolitical reading, the BRI can be understood primarily as a scramble over network centrality (that is, across logistics, production and telecommunication networks) that some have called the Second Cold War (Schindler et al, 2023) in which Chinese-financed transnational projects signal the rise of a new world power.

This edited volume outlines a material understanding of the BRI, drawing from these broader narratives and underlying logics while focusing on the making and living of the massive new projects that constitute the planning and delivery of this strategy.¹ Our intention is to foreground where in space – and for whom – the experiences, interactions and impacts of BRI investments, plans and operations are found. The contributions set out across

the chapters of this book focus on these material dimensions of the BRI, demonstrating how grand economic and political interpretations become grounded in particular social and environmental realities. This exploration is centred around two main foci: the *political-ecological* and *infrastructural* conditions being produced. The BRI is mobilized through substantial financial commitments, with projected plans requiring up to USD 8 trillion (Hurley et al, 2018) in investment and its geographic scope involving 140 countries (Hillman, 2020) and a dizzying assortment of corporate and state actors.

After over a decade of operation, the BRI has significantly influenced the (re)making of many spaces and places. The massive investments associated with BRI projects continue to expand across ever-growing territories of logistical circulation, while diverse new construction activities proceed rapidly. From Kenya to Nepal, Jamaica to Kazakhstan, the BRI is often the dominant factor in investment inflows, leading to localized, material transformation. Debates about shifting geopolitical and economic power shaping global futures often underscore how policy makers, politicians and the public approach, debate and respond to the BRI. However, with this volume, we put specific focus on how the changes being unleashed are already being felt and experienced in many parts of the world. This book turns its gaze toward this world transformed.

The BRI as territorial restructuring

Despite the notion of creating a continuous surface, as implied by the term ‘belt’, the movement of capital, goods and people instigated through the BRI occurs primarily across corridors, within and between key urban nodes, with strategically located flagship projects in selected cities even as these projects move across extended territories of operation, including rural hinterlands. As evidenced by the BRI’s vision document (Chinese Government, 2015), the allocation of investments (Derudder et al, 2018) and a significant body of academic, policy and journalistic analysis, the BRI has become a global catalyst of extensive material transformation. It inscribes new connections linking regions and reconfiguring existing cities into trade, financial and tourist hubs and producing entirely new cities (Apostolopoulou, 2021b; Apostolopoulou et al, 2024). The BRI introduces novel combinations of large-scale infrastructure alongside industrial projects (Blanchard et al, 2017) and significant investments across multiple economic sectors. This encompasses railways, roads, waterways, airports, ports, industrial parks, manufacturing zones, special economic zones (SEZs) and fibre-optic telecommunication networks as well as initiatives such as smart cities, greenfield investments, real estate developments, agribusinesses and commercial projects.

We find it useful to highlight *three types of BRI-led territorial restructuring* that convey why we pay close attention to how social and environmental geographies are being transformed. First, the BRI has been organized in direct relation to the Sino-centric regional and global production networks in which investments in the built environment and infrastructure are directly territorially connected and integrated into China's economy. This has proceeded through the BRI's six international economic corridors: the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-Western Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China-Pakistan and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridors and their various offshoots. For instance, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor connects the Chinese city of Tianjin, across massive hinterlands and rural areas, with Mongolian cities, such as Choyr and Darkah, and Russian cities, such as Ulan-Ude (Vorobyev et al, 2018). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is intended to open up new economic connections for western China by providing direct access to the Indian Ocean (Malik et al, 2021). In doing so, it generates new flows, interdependencies and relational forms of urban and rural growth. Xinjiang's economic fate is now arguably entwined with the Baluchistan port city of Gwadar, which is heralded as Pakistan's 'Dubai' (Al-Shammari, 2017) and is being transformed through billions of US dollars of BRI investment. Through these investments, hopes for 'economic revival for Pakistan and prosperity in the western region of China' are manifested via new infrastructural connections (Perveen and Khalil, 2015, p 353). Additionally, the direct connectivity created by these corridors are generating new cross-border urban and rural spaces, such as the Muse Border Economic Zone in Myanmar and its connected Chinese city of Ruili (Song et al, 2020) as part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Studies focused on this type of BRI-led restructuring of territory highlight the ways in which economic growth both inside and outside China becomes entwined and intensified through BRI investments, connecting to longer (both modern and ancient) shared histories (for example, Safina et al, 2023). And these direct territorial restructurings are also taking place far beyond China's borders. For instance, the city of Duisburg, Germany, has rapidly transformed into one of the central logistics hubs in Europe (Pascha, 2021) through its connection to Chongqing, southwest China, via the Chongqing-Xinjiang-EU transcontinental railway corridor.

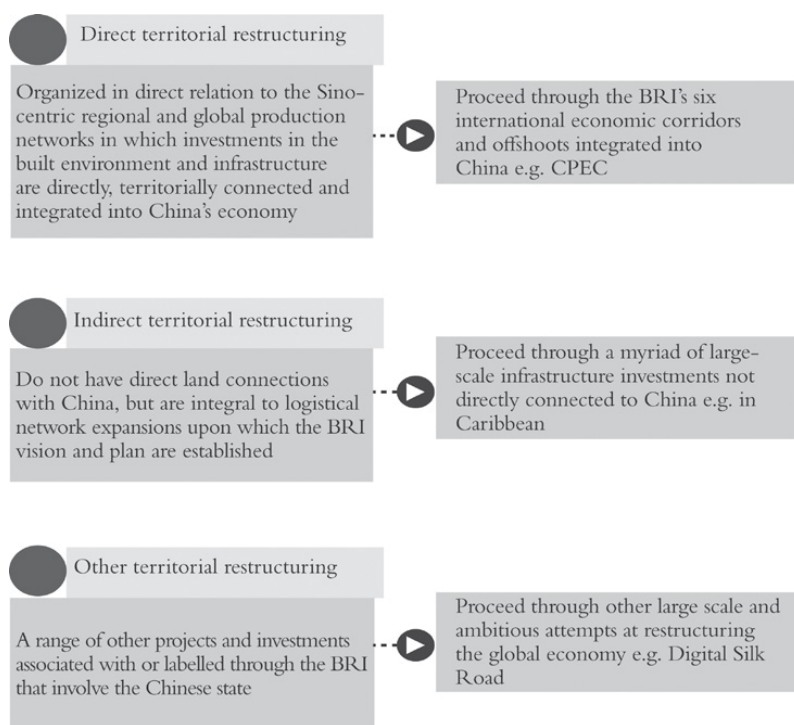
Second, we draw attention to territories that do not have direct land connections with China, but are integral to logistical network expansions on which the BRI vision and plan are established, encompassing regions including sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. These investments are often part of large-scale, cross-border infrastructure corridors financed through various Chinese state-owned enterprises that incorporate urban-rural restructuring as part of the systemic restructuring of logistical

networks. Studies of these projects emphasize the critical role of coastal zones in the BRI, which are connected through various oceanic routes that comprise the Maritime Silk Road and a new global network of ports aligned to the BRI. For instance, the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor project (LAPSSET), anchored in Kenya, aims to integrate the hinterlands of East Africa into enhanced economic relations both in the region and facing out towards the Indian Ocean. LAPSSET finds its start (or end) points in port cities and expansion of port facilities in Lamu (Wan et al, 2021) that criss-cross and transform rural territories. The selective connectivity of these spaces generates political ecological and infrastructural conditions that shape conflicting patterns of regional transformation, urbanization, geopolitical formations, geo-economic divisions of labour, structures of social and political life (Graham and Marvin, 2022; Salamanca and Silver, 2022) and new forms of social-environmental inequality and uneven development, producing ‘exclusions, deprivations, disruptions, vulnerabilities, and disposessions for large population segments’ in hinterland areas (Brenner, 2019, p 379).

Third, and finally, BRI projects have spilled out into various different initiatives, investments and projections with planetary ambitions across diverse spaces, scales and locations that offer a further form of territorial restructuring. This includes a Digital (Seone, 2020), a Polar (Woon, 2020) and a Space Silk Road (Filjović, 2020). These ambitions by China are also generating shifting political ecologies and infrastructural conditions. While these unfolding projects might not fit into the direct and extended forms of territorial restructuring highlighted earlier, the new patterns, dynamics and spaces being produced are important in how we think about the BRI’s material geographies. For instance, the Digital Silk Road involves infrastructural investment across multiple locations, but also broader restructuring of digital space across sectors such as finance, surveillance and big data management through new forms of digitization and a global vision for dominance over ICT sectors and associated manufacturing (Chang, 2023). Such projects often overlap, associate with and build off the other forms of investment being promoted through BRI-led territorial restructuring.

How the BRI is territorially restructuring the planet

In thinking through the implications of these three types of BRI-led territorial restructuring, we want to emphasize that a China-centric focus alone is insufficient to account for the transformations occurring across multiple spaces, scales and places. While the BRI is of course Chinese-led, in its broader objectives, through financial mechanisms such as loans from the Export-Import Bank of China and construction companies such as the China Road and Bridge Corporation, this represents only part of the

Figure 0.2: How the BRI is restructuring the planet

Source: Diagram by the editors

landscape when analysing the transformation of social and environmental geographies discussed in this volume. In many cases, the BRI is financing and mobilizing long-standing ambitions of national governments rather than initiating an entirely new set of economic and spatial strategies. The LAPSSET project, for example, restructured the port city of Lamu and some of Kenya's 'secondary' cities, such as Isiolo, as well as regional hinterlands (Bremner, 2013; Elliott, 2020). However, as studies have demonstrated, much of the spatial planning for LAPSSET has previously been bound up in the Kenyan Vision 2030 plan (Aalders et al, 2021) even if it becomes mobilized through Chinese logistical objectives, finance and expertise.

This does not imply that the BRI has a minor impact on national and regional scale politics, power dynamics and associated geopolitical relations. Rather, it underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between previously existing national or regional territorial plans and policies, diverse national, local, private and state interests, and Chinese-led interests and BRI projects. This also suggests that a close reading of the longer histories of these plans, extending back to the colonial and early

and later independence eras in Kenya's case, can help analyse the ever-shifting and evolving geographies and unequal power relations of projects such as LAPSET (Kimari and Ernstson, 2020). In this context, the BRI is best understood as a contextual and contingent cross-scale geography, the product of complex interrelations between people, places, socionatures, ideas, practices and processes that produce BRI's multiple social and environmental spaces (Cheng and Apostolopoulou, 2023).

The need for a grounded approach to the BRI

The BRI has given rise to a burgeoning literature that has expanded across varied disciplines, topics and geographical boundaries. BRI scholarship has focused on geopolitical (Blanchard et al, 2017), geo-economic (Lee et al, 2018; Sum, 2019), geo-cultural (Winter, 2016) and political economy (Summers, 2016) analyses, BRI's critical genealogies (Sidaway et al, 2020), its role in globalization patterns, environmental (Ahmad et al, 2018; Hughes, 2019; Teo et al, 2019) and energy aspects, and finance (Lai et al, 2020) and debt implications (Hurley et al, 2018; Jones and Harmeiri, 2020). Despite its relevance and breadth, BRI studies have tended to prioritize the macroeconomic and geopolitical factors (Sidaway et al, 2020) over the ways in which its territorial restructuring transforms space and place, with social and environmental implications. This is partly explained by the time it takes for many of these large projects to be planned, constructed and operated. Nonetheless, a growing number of scholars drawing on various fields, including geography, urban studies, political economy and political ecology, have moved beyond seeing the BRI as a static and top-down, state-centric strategy originated in Beijing. They emphasize, as we have, the need to conceptualize the BRI as a flexible (Alff, 2020), relational process with uncertain outcomes subject to the spatial embeddedness of each project and local political and fiscal conditions (Han and Webber, 2020). This has led to calls in the past few years to explore the initiative 'from the ground' (de LT Oliveira et al, 2020; Murton and Lord, 2020) and pay attention to the intertwined policies, discourses and projects involved in its unfolding.

A grounded approach offers important insights that point to the spaces and places being transformed through BRI projects and the way society and environments are profoundly impacted. This includes empirical investigations on: land speculations and the uneven and gendered vulnerabilities for marginalized groups, such as women or migrant labourers, living and working in places where BRI projects are materialized (Beazley and Lassoie, 2017); exclusions of vulnerable populations from infrastructure construction (Dwyer, 2020); processes of accumulation and dispossession related to the privatization of strategic infrastructure (Neilson 2019); and the intensification of labour precarity, worsening of working conditions and violation of

worker's rights. It extends to critically assessing the creation of logistical zones across urban spaces (Gambino, 2019), the rapid emergence of free enterprise zones, manufacturing areas and commercial projects that alter space and the geographies of everyday lives, and the role of BRI projects in reshaping parts of towns and cities into industrial enclaves and transit corridors. In this edited volume, we contribute to, consolidate and map future directions in this scholarship focused on the material transformations that reverberate throughout the making and operating of the BRI.

Critical approaches to the material transformations of the BRI

The underpinning approach to examining the material transformations of the BRI and the structure of this volume is rooted in two closely interrelated bodies of scholarship: political ecology (Perrault et al, 2015) and infrastructure studies (Graham and Marvin, 2001). These complementary and overlapping approaches draw on multidisciplinary perspectives and debates across geography, anthropology, urban studies and science-technology-society studies, among others. As editors and contributors to this volume on the BRI, we have built our work on the multifaceted and, importantly, grounded lens that these conceptual approaches open up to critical scholarship.

Political ecology foregrounds questions about how environment-society relations are being reshaped through the BRI, highlighting the dynamics and processes through which massive new investments impact humans and non-human natures in multiple ways. It serves as a critical analytical tool crucial for discerning the material transformations driven by China's BRI. By focusing on the relations between political economy, politics and socio-natural transformation, a political ecology approach makes visible the manifold impacts of BRI projects on diverse ecosystems, landscapes, resource systems and livelihoods. In other words, it offers a comprehensive view into how BRI-driven investments, operations, flows and extractions interact with and reshape ecosystems and places, triggering environmental and spatial change, injustice, land use reconfigurations and socioeconomic disruptions. Political ecology theories often explore the metabolism of environmental flows (Swyngedouw, 2006; Smith, 2010), demonstrating how large-scale projects may generate new socio-natural circulations across territories and produce effects at multiple scales. These effects can range from the national scale (for example, new financial flows into specific cities or hinterlands) down to households (for example, the environmental harms caused by displacement). By doing so, political ecology can support an interdisciplinary analysis of the effects and contested nature of BRI-driven material transformations on the contours of everyday lives, places and socionatures. For instance, Harlan (2020) uses political ecology to question the 'green development' agenda within the BRI by analysing

investments in low-carbon infrastructure and technologies. [Joniak-Lüthi \(2020\)](#) examines the political ecological complexity of road maintenance in the Sino-Inner Asian borderlands. Likewise, [Beazley and Lassoie \(2017\)](#) explore the impact of expanding rural road networks on social and ecological systems in the Nepalese Himalaya. Seeing both urban and rural places impacted by the BRI through a ‘metabolic lens’ broadens the epistemology of social-environmental change and the objects of geographical and political ecology research to encompass, for example, port infrastructure, the built environment, marine ecosystems, policies, laws, livelihoods and struggles.

Infrastructure studies centre on the pivotal role of these networks within the BRI and across various scales, spanning from local to global. Infrastructure encompasses a vast assortment of networks, including energy grids, urban provision systems, transportation and logistics systems, telecommunication technologies and more ([Wiig et al, 2023](#)). Infrastructure functions as the underlying foundation for the circulation of people, goods and information. This circulation, in turn, not only sustains but also produces and maintains the fabric of everyday life, underscoring the interconnectedness between material transformation, relations between humans and non-human natures, and the built environment across contemporary societies. Moreover, drawing on infrastructure studies, we can see these systems, networks and the spaces they occupy ([Carse, 2016](#)) as the foundation of the BRI’s social, economic and geopolitical power. While often remaining ‘black boxed’ ([Star, 1999](#)), infrastructure has recently emerged as a key object of study, foregrounding the production of both global economic flows and the local dimensions of everyday lives ([Graham and McFarlane, 2014](#)) through these combined social and technical constellations. For instance, [Lesutis \(2021\)](#) examines how BRI projects in Kenya, particularly new railways, shape and reflect state practices of infrastructural territorialization that reconstitute racial and socioeconomic inequalities. In Lamu, Kenya, [Alden et al \(2021\)](#) highlight how the port expansion connected to the BRI-financed LAPSSET project was predicated on the displacement of local people, including farming and fishing communities, as rural land was transformed into global urban and logistical space. Stories of infrastructural-led displacement related to the BRI also feature prominently in studies within cities, such as the Orange Line metro in Lahore ([Tassadiq, 2022](#)), and on roads and railway projects between cities and across rural hinterlands ([Enns and Bersaglio, 2020](#)). Infrastructure studies can help to make visible the ways in which BRI projects create new forms of injustice as large-scale projects cut across urban and rural spaces, demanding the displacement of existing communities, exclude people from premium enclave spaces, such as new economic zones, and disrupt existing infrastructure services, such as water or energy, during construction and operation.

Crucially, while the construction of new BRI infrastructure projects may promise enhanced global connections, it also often disrupts and undermines existing relations, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable by alienating them from previously familiar spaces. Such transformations echo broader analyses of private real estate or logistical enclaves (Appel, 2012), with emerging infrastructures acting as securitized symbols that escalate growing inequality and governmental neglect of public infrastructure. States and companies across the Global South and North are increasingly prioritizing the optimal operation of global supply networks over social reproduction infrastructures, almost inevitably subjugating democratic principles and the wellbeing of human and non-human lives to the imperative of seamless capital circulation (Chua et al, 2018; Ziadah, 2018), exemplified by the heightened exploitation of workers, socionatures and communities along trade routes and shipping corridors (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; Apostolopoulou, 2021b; Danyluk, 2021). As Apostolopoulou and Pizarro (2025) have shown in their work on the Chancay mega-port and logistics centre in Peru, from the perspective of state territorial and spatial planning, these megaprojects reflect increasing foreign involvement in local affairs, shaping development policies while failing to address the needs of marginalized communities. From the standpoint of local communities and the most vulnerable, they register as the entrenchment of state abandonment, marginalization and exclusion. Unlike public infrastructures that evoke a sense of abandonment due to malfunctioning, these contested infrastructures evoke despair, fear and loss due to their functioning and the potential ways they will shape new, currently unknown, futures that exacerbate infrastructural violence with detrimental consequences for both local livelihoods and ecosystems (see Apostolopoulou and Pizarro, 2025; see also Apostolopoulou, 2024).

Drawing on infrastructure and political ecology studies, we can begin to see how the materialization of the BRI through various projects draws attention to complex socio-technical processes (Murton and Lord, 2020) that are simultaneously social, ecological and relational (Star, 1999). These processes mediate lives and socionatures, reconfiguring the production of non-human nature and space, as well as the geographies of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1970; Graham and McFarlane, 2015). New and reinforced vulnerabilities become visible as the BRI materially transforms the fabric of societies (Joniak-Lüthi, 2020) and environments. The projects being materialized through the BRI act as enabling mechanisms, involving a constellation of material relations and flows that facilitate specific social and material activities (Larkin, 2013; Bosworth, 2022). Examining BRI projects through the lens of the contradictory forces and unequal power dynamics that influence their creation and daily experience enables us to determine under what circumstances they can have detrimental or beneficial effects, and for whom, as infrastructure studies scholarship has long considered

(Graham and Marvin, 2001; Mmanca and Silver, 2022). In this sense, BRI projects constitute sites where state actions intersect with the global economy and development processes (Ferguson, 2010) and are integral to daily life, influencing the systemic conditions of possibility under which people can act (Harvey, 2018).

In foregrounding the social and environmental (re)orderings that are manifested and experienced in the materialization of BRI projects, we can also begin to see how the provision, maintenance and transformation of these territorial restructurings are contested and politicized, enabling and embodying various forms of state and corporate violence (Datta and Ahmed, 2020). Rodgers and O'Neill (2012, pp 401–3), drawing on Mann's concept of infrastructural power and Graham's notion of infrastructural warfare, use the term infrastructural violence to describe how 'processes of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion' are often operated and sustained by infrastructure, drawing attention to how 'the workings of infrastructure can be substantially deleterious'. The concept of infrastructural violence uncovers the political economy behind the socio-spatial production of suffering by providing a concrete way to discuss who is responsible for harm and spark action toward achieving infrastructural justice (Enns and Sneyd, 2020). As Datta and Ahmed (2020) argue, infrastructural violence is often located in geopolitical and ecological conflicts and in disaster and crisis contexts (Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012), and is entwined with the structural violence of neoliberal urbanization (Graham and Marvin, 2001). In their work on Nepal, Apostolopoulou and Pant (2022) demonstrate, for example, how BRI projects have become vehicles towards 'Naya Nepal', a new infrastructural myth emerging from the ruins of the past as the ultimate path to achieving a long due rural-to-urban transition. However, this transition exacerbates decades of infrastructural violence and precarity, suppressing people's struggles against the unequal geographies of BRI-driven material transformation. Throughout the chapters in this book, we ask the reader to hold this idea of infrastructural violence in mind and to think about it in a wider sense of both the social and environmental harms being produced and the ways in which BRI projects produce injustice and inequality. Many of the contributions directly or indirectly address such forces and experiences, providing a critical focus for grounded studies of the BRI that move beyond geo-economic and geopolitical readings.

The book's underpinning in political ecology and infrastructure studies means centring open-ended ideas of inequality and violence at the core of understanding the material transformations driven by BRI projects. This framing shifts attention to a range of possible injustices, including the loss of livelihoods and homes, violations of workers' rights, shifting labour conditions, land acquisitions, environmental degradation, intensification of social segregation, spatial fragmentation, territorial stigmatization and

discrimination, displacement, dispossession, and gentrification, as well as the loss, privatization and enclosure of public space, the unequal impacts of techno-social differentiation and the suppression of local struggles and rights to the city, nature and the commons. This approach broadens the analysis of contestation surrounding BRI projects, which has been relatively limited in the first decade of its operations, reflecting a broader gap in integrating social and environmental struggles. In this regard, infrastructural violence and injustice are inextricably linked to environmental injustice, simultaneously affecting socionatures, places and livelihoods and uniting struggles for social, environmental and spatial justice. This also underscores the vital role of conflict in the unfolding of the BRI on the ground, emphasizing the variations, disruptions, uncertainties and anticipations that shape its outcomes.

By bringing infrastructure and political ecology studies into productive dialogue, we aim to draw attention to the range of issues outlined so far. The geographical extent and material fixity of BRI projects (Li, 2018) exacerbate social and environmental challenges faced by communities. The duration and impact of these projects underscore the urgency of addressing the social and environmental consequences that arise from them. This, we contend, is why a grounded, material analysis of BRI projects that places at its epicentre the way marginalized communities experience infrastructural and political ecological conditions is vital for developing a critical research agenda over a decade into the BRI.

Developing a critical research agenda

This edited volume provides an agenda-setting analysis that is also policy-relevant and socially-environmentally significant, highlighting the novel ways in which the BRI reconfigures the patterns of global inequality. Through a geographically expansive understanding of the BRI, the volume unravels the distinct and diverse ways BRI projects remake lives, natures and places across the Global South and North through transforming infrastructures and political ecologies. Moreover, the volume offers an analysis that moves beyond a binary understanding of the BRI that currently prevails in extant scholarship, which tends to either exaggerate the grandiose nature of the BRI (Hillman, 2020) and Chinese exceptionalism (Zhang, 2013) or undermine the BRI as a cohesive, geopolitically driven grand strategy (Jones and Zeng, 2019) and present it as a fragmented initiative driven solely by project-specific characteristics (Cheng and Apostolopoulou, 2023). By analysing the BRI as a materially grounded field of practice (Oakes, 2021), we hope to advance an extroverted perspective of place (Massey, 1994) that aspires to the planetary (Brenner and Schmid, 2015) through the intensive study of the concrete and the particular to understand a large-scale,

multi-scalar process through its fragments and sedimented effects (Katz, 2021), confronting the challenge of theorizing from anywhere (Robinson, 2011). That way, we argue for a focus on the BRI that needs not imply a one-dimensional interpretation of China or stand in opposition to Global China scholarship that perceives China as a method (Shin et al, 2022). Instead, we hope to reflect a theorization of the BRI as an exemplar of a broader process of infrastructure-led development that is rapidly becoming hegemonic worldwide, as evidenced by initiatives like the European Union's EUR 300 billion European Union Global Gateway, the USD 600 billion Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and the newly born India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

The political ecologies and infrastructures of the BRI

The BRI has emerged as a transformative force reshaping landscapes and livelihoods across continents. As this global infrastructure project unfolds, it redraws territorial, urban and economic geographies and its political, environmental and social implications come to the fore, generating diverse narratives, conflicts and challenges. The contributors in this volume focus on diverse case studies spanning the Global South and North and offering critical insights into the complex dynamics at play. From the contested coal-fired power projects in Indonesia to the grassroots environmentalism in Thailand's SEZs, and from the environmental politics of the China-Laos railway to the nature of Sino-Sri Lankan development narratives, the chapters illuminate the intricate intersections of infrastructure, power, ecology, geopolitics, sustainability agendas and development within the broader framework of the BRI.

In particular, in her chapter, **Bowen Gu** closely examines the contested coal-fired power in the BRI using Indonesia as a case study. Chinese companies and financiers have played an important role in supporting the development of coal-fired power plants (CFPPs) in Indonesia in the past decade. These projects have met increasing resistance from local communities and civil society due to land disputes, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss and health impacts. Based on a systematic mapping and comparative analysis of social mobilizations and community resistance against CFPPs with Chinese investment in Indonesia in the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice, as well as in-depth interviews, the chapter focuses on the community-level environmental, health and socioeconomic impact of CFPPs in BRI projects and the power relations that led to local grassroots struggles.

Also grounded in the Southeast Asian context, **Ratchada Arpornsilp's** chapter discusses the dynamics of grassroots environmentalism in the case of natural resource conflicts in Thailand's SEZs. In Thailand, the

military-installed government directed the establishment of SEZs in ten border provinces in 2014 under regional economic connectivity collaborations that constitute the components of the BRI. The ambiguous and contested process of acquiring public or communal lands for SEZs has been conducted without the informed engagement and consent of local stakeholders, who previously accessed these lands and resources to sustain their livelihoods. Combining the analytical framings of political ecology and social movement theory, Arpornsilp explores, with a focus on the border of Thailand and Laos, how SEZs as well as land and natural resource conflicts stimulate grassroots anti-dispossession responses and local collective actions vis-à-vis the state counter-movements.

Xiaofeng Liu takes us to another case in the region by studying the environmental politics of the China-Laos railway, especially its China section (Yuxi-Mohan railway) in China's Yunnan province. Using materials collected from the field, including government documents and interviews with railway companies and local governments and communities, she argues that as a much-anticipated project, the Yuxi-Mohan railway also generates conflicts at the intersection of local development, national mission, international connectivity and geopolitics. Local conflicts concerning environment and resources, often concealed behind grand narratives, can be attributed to contradictions across scales, namely clashes between local planning, national ecological redlines and international pressure, as well as asymmetric relations of different stakeholders. Her research contributes to theoretical discussion on environmental politics of infrastructure and offers practical implications for improving the sustainability of transnational infrastructure projects.

In the South Asian context, **Orlando Woods, Kanchana Ruwanpura, Loritta Chan** and **Barnabas Mah** raise the nature question in Sino-Sri Lankan development narratives. The authors place the question of nature within the narrative of Sri Lanka's debt crisis specifically, and its postwar political economy more generally. In doing so, they move the debt discourse beyond its normative financial associations and consider the plurality of 'debts' that infrastructure megaprojects like those of the BRI can give rise to. They argue that Chinese lending does not have prohibitive interest rates, but it has come without the proper due diligence afforded by technical feasibility studies, financial viability studies or environmental impact assessments. By taking this approach, the authors intend to bring the 'debt-trap' narrative into conversation with recent scholarly work on the social and environmental consequences of BRI-associated infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. Hence, they explore both the ecological ramifications of indebtedness, but also the role of nature in providing a way out in the form of debt-for-nature swaps. By doing so, they seek to move the question of debt to whom beyond its normative geo-economic and geopolitical

associations by considering the natural world as both the subject and object of ‘debt’.

This volume also examines the political ecologies of the BRI in the Global North. **Hannes Langguth**’s chapter focuses on the deployment of a large-scale Chinese green technology project in Eastern Germany. Driven by the European Union’s green transition, formerly bypassed regions in Europe are increasingly becoming the focus for large-scale green energy projects, of which a significant part is driven by Chinese outbound investment. Drawing on empirical material related to a recently established Chinese gigafactory for electric vehicle battery cells and associated energy, research and logistics infrastructure in Eastern Germany, Langguth’s chapter illustrates how state-level governments become key drivers in the deployment of the project, while marginalizing local actors in the process. Thus, this chapter highlights the role of host-state actors and place-specific histories and power structures, which significantly shape the localization of China’s global infrastructure expansion.

Moreover, **Ksenija Hanaček**’s chapter conceptualizes the Polar Silk Road corridor as a continuation of colonialism of the Arctic region through foreign investment, infrastructure expansion, extractivism and climate change – all of which serve the Polar Corridor development. It does so by analysing several resistances to climate emergency, oil, liquified natural gas and mining projects as well as massive nuclear maritime infrastructure developments. The main argument underlined in this chapter is that climate-ecological disruptions inform colonial past and present as well as contested visions for the Arctic future by Indigenous peoples and local communities. As the Polar Silk Road extends its reach into the Arctic, the discourse on climate coloniality and resistance gains prominence, offering new perspectives on the planetary implications of transnational infrastructure projects.

With regards to transnational infrastructure initiatives in Asia, **Caixia Mao** applies the concept of infrastructure assemblage in Chinese and Japanese initiatives, focusing on the railway projects in Indonesia. Through case studies such as the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway by China and the Jakarta-Surabaya medium-speed railway by Japan, Mao analyses the political economic drivers for state and non-state Chinese and Japanese actors in launching the BRI and the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI). By elucidating the interaction between Chinese and Japanese actors and local stakeholders in Indonesia, the chapter enriches theoretical discussions surrounding the BRI and PQI, offering insights into the complexities of infrastructure development within diverse sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, it contributes to an inter-Asian comparative lens on transnational infrastructure initiatives in the BRI context, facilitating a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping regional connectivity and development strategies.

Simone Vegliò's chapter proposes a theoretical and geopolitical discussion of the BRI from the vantage point of Latin America. Over the past few years, a proliferation of bilateral agreements between China and Latin American nations has been promoting the construction of mega infrastructure projects. While several Latin American governments and institutions are portraying these projects as new material articulations that can trigger the socioeconomic development of the region, a process of substantial 're-primarization' of its national economies is nonetheless evident. On the one hand, this kind of 'infrastructure-led development' appears just to reinforce Latin America's position as a global exporter of primary resources, which has largely characterized its economy since the colonial period. From this perspective, there seems not to be a significant change, but rather a reiteration – or even a solidification – of the 'dependency' relations that have historically produced Latin America within the global space; yet, at the same time, it is hard to deny the radical novelty of having China as a new actor in search for geo-economic and geopolitical hegemony from a position of substantial power outside the 'traditional' North. By discussing the most recent projects, debates and issues of the BRI's action in Latin America, the chapter provides a 'postcolonial' analysis on the topic.

Patrick Bond draws our attention to the BRI in Africa by discussing Chinese investment, finance and trade controversies in Southern Africa. Bond argues that Chinese engagements in Southern Africa exhibit under-developmental and super-exploitative characteristics, rooted in Chinese capitalist crisis conditions. By conceptualizing the BRI as a spatial fix for overaccumulated capital, Bond sheds light on the extreme manifestations of global uneven development in the region. Through a critical examination of Chinese investments and trade relations, the chapter contributes to a nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic dynamics shaping BRI engagements in Africa.

There are also two chapters focusing on the BRI's implications for Europe. **Francesca Governa, Leonardo Ramondetti, Astrid Safina, Angelo Sampieri and Alberto Valz Gris** examine how the intersection of the BRI with pre-existing development trajectories in Southern Europe is generating diverse spatial configurations and socioeconomic conditions, challenging the perceived uniformity of this infrastructure-led development programme. This is particularly evident along the Adriatic Corridor, where trade between the ports of Piraeus and Trieste is rapidly growing thanks to the Maritime Silk Road. Although this corridor is a logistical continuum, these two terminals differ significantly. Beyond any comparative approach, this chapter illustrates the varied approaches the BRI adopts with the national contexts, the diverse development strategies it pursues and the varying degrees of formal participation by China. The authors invite

reflection on two critical issues: first, how the BRI navigates and adapts to diverse contexts in order to ensure the smooth circulation of goods and investments; and, second, how the interplay of different local political, economic and social conditions results in the fragmentation of the BRI into multiple and differentiated geographies.

Evelina Gambino traces the attempted development of Anaklia, a village on the Georgian Black Sea coast, into a major logistical hub seen as vital for Georgia's transformation into a transit corridor, an element of the BRI that would forge new connections between Europe and Asia. The project came to a halt in 2019, however. In the wake of this failure, this chapter analyses the creation of Anaklia as a future-oriented logistical space. Competition between different corridors is at the heart of the BRI, and each physical infrastructure depends on a complex entanglement of (im)material infrastructures – concessions, contracts, synchronization of data and practices – to become operative. Developmental promises attached to logistics are thus resting on shaky and often unpredictable grounds. Drawing on feminist analyses of the economy and its multifaceted reproduction, this chapter delves into the different forms of labour – manual, affective and administrative – necessary to turn the uncertainty and unevenness of competition-based global systems into a certain prediction of Georgia's logistical future.

Last but not least, **Elia Apostolopoulou's** chapter brings together various themes discussed so far by offering a comparative account that crosses the North and South. It explores the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality in the BRI. Here, the BRI is theorized as a spatial fix to the overaccumulation problems of Chinese capitalism, and particular attention is paid to the role of urbanization. By drawing on postcolonial geographies, the chapter offers a relational analysis of divergent trajectories of socio-spatial urban change driven by BRI projects in Athens, Colombo and London. The key argument is that urban transformation driven by the BRI signals the emergence of a new form of infrastructure-led authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. This engenders both new urban formations and new urban politics that, despite variegated expressions across different contexts, are reconfiguring urban space and are transforming the social geography of each city by creating, facilitating or exacerbating spatial fragmentation and social segregation.

Overall, by bridging various traditions of geographical, development, urban, and science-technology-society studies, as well as political ecology research, this edited volume aims to provide a cohesive and critical analysis of the multifaceted impacts of BRI projects on space, livelihoods and ecosystems. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it seeks to uncover the interconnectedness of these impacts, shedding light on the material

Figure 0.3: ‘The beginning of hope’, Piraeus Port, Athens, Greece



Source: Photograph by Elia Apostolopoulou

Figure 0.4: Piraeus COSCO container terminal



Source: Photograph by Elia Apostolopoulou

realities and the sociopolitical, economic and environmental dynamics at play. Spanning four continents and encompassing diverse regional, national and urban contexts, the edited volume provides a comprehensive geographical breadth necessary for theorizing a global initiative like the BRI. Through its rigorous examination, the volume aims to unravel both existing and emerging

Figure 0.5: A COSCO container on the Northern Corridor in Kenya



Source: Photograph by Jonathan Silver

Figure 0.6: Underneath the BRI-financed Orange Line in Lahore



Source: Photograph by Jonathan Silver

Figure 0.7: A wall on the boardwalk reads ‘No to the mega-port’, Chancay, Peru



Source: Photograph by Alejandra Pizarro. Previously published in E. Apostolopoulou and A. Pizarro (2024) Contesting the anticipated infrastructural city: a grounded analysis of Silk Road urbanization in the multipurpose port terminal in Chancay, Peru, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 115(1), 223–41. doi: [10.1080/24694452.2024.2415718](https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2024.2415718). Available under creative commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

forms of injustice engendered by the BRI, ranging from dispossession and displacement to issues of race, class, gender discrimination, violations of workers’ rights and unequal access to space and nature. Grounded in empirical research, it strives to centre those often marginalized in mainstream scholarship and policy making, bringing their voices and experiences to the forefront. Importantly, by recognizing the pivotal role of people’s struggles in shaping the outcomes of infrastructure projects, the volume delves into the intricacies of daily negotiations, improvisations and resistance against the impacts of contentious projects. Our inspiration is to use this analysis as a critical tool for deciphering 21st-century infrastructure-led development and unpacking the implications of what some have termed the era of extreme infrastructure (Hildyard and Sol, 2017), as well as for exploring the potential of emerging global-local alliances to pave the way for radically different futures.

Figure 0.8: Tangier, Morocco, a new waterfront development



Source: Photograph taken by Elia Apostolopoulou

Figure 0.9: The Export-Import Bank of China-funded standard gauge railway in Kenya



Source: Photograph taken by Jonathan Silver

Figure 0.10: Valencia port (Spain), next to Las Arenas beach – COSCO Shipping operates one of the port terminals



Source: Photograph taken by Elia Apostolopoulou

Note

- ¹ We would like to highlight that the title of the book (*Material Geographies*) is inspired by the historical materialism approach.

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