

The Belt and Road Initiative in the Context of the COVID-19¹

Laurentiu Gagu²

Abstract: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) outlines a new conceptual framework that would allow China to play a bigger role in the world economy and international relations. However, the conceptual foundation of the BRI establishes essential components of the Chinese foreign (economic) policy in the long run. Understanding China's BRI development strategies may help the neighbouring states to learn Beijing's intentions at the regional level. Is the BRI China's vehicle for the road to a peaceful development or is it a covering strategy for acquiring, at least, regional hegemony? Moreover, how the BRI is going to develop considering the COVID-19 outbreak? The goals of the essay are to examine the core features of China's most audacious project: The Belt and Road Initiative. However, the scope of the paper goes further explaining BRI's geopolitical aims, how the COVID-19 may transform the project, and its relevance to China's financial reformation process.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China; Eurasia; USA; Russia; geopolitics; objectives; peaceful development; economic integration

Introduction

To comprehend policies of the Xi Jinping administration, we should explain the actual foreign policy, which, during Xi's tenure, has been marked by keeping some policies of the previous government, that was headed by Hu Jintao while fusing new priorities (Danner, 2018). Some of them are relating to the need for having a stable and durable international scene/ environment for China's development plans. This

¹ This paper was financially supported by the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project POCU/380/6/13/124708 no. 37141/23.05.2019, with the title "ResearcherEntrepreneur on Labour Market in the Fields of Intelligent Specialization (CERT-ANTREP)", coordinated by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration.

² PhD Candidate, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, Address: Blvd. Expoziției 30A, Bucharest 012244, Romania, Corresponding author: glaurentiu37@gmail.com.

relationship between domestic development policies and the balance of the international system is highly tied to the Hu Jintao Government's doctrine of peaceful development (Yi, 2005). Xi's speech during the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (UN) in September 2015, "China will continue to participate in building world peace. We are committed to peaceful development" (Nikhil Sonnad, 2015), represents the most serious commitment of Xi's peaceful development policy adherence. On the other hand, China's policy for maintaining a stable international environment has some factual limitations. Although China's discourse concerning its Neighbours' sovereignty and territorial integrity is very apparent in Xi's official talk, there are a lot of skirmishes in the East and the South China Sea (Herscovitch, 2017). Nevertheless, the two policies of protection and defence of territorial integrity have never been an obstacle for China for establishing economic and trade relations based on diplomatic pragmatism, as it was the case of the 2008-2016 Ma Yingjie's tenure in Taiwan, for instance.

So far, Xi Jinping has influenced China's foreign policies adding approaches worth mentioning. First of all, Xi emphasized his aspirations for the link between development and stability considering China's strategies of peaceful development. Moreover, China seeks to increase its leverage within international bodies, like the United Nations, in areas such as the fight against terrorism. Furthermore, Xi has proposed new economic organizations, especially for Asian countries. Through both the Asian Bank for Infrastructure Investments AIIB and the Silk Road Fund, China looks for reducing the Asian countries' development gap (Zhai, 2018). However, the building of the two banks was driven by the lack of new sustainable development strategies, and by the long-delayed reformation of the global economic structure, too (Huang, 2016). Xi Jinping also proposed a new and balanced cooperation strategy between the leading powers, called – "A new model of great power relations" (Hadley, 2014).

Last but not least, the employment of a grand strategy of economic development like the BRI. One of the main goals of the BRI is to relate, through connectivity projects such as infrastructure development, some of the most problematic regions of China, like Xinjiang and Tibet. Those regions are also linked to all over the world (Europe, Africa, etc.).

The Chinese enterprise called "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) places new stress on the evolution of international relations at a time when political and economic instability reached its highest highs. At this rate, placing more importance on the

rapid transformation pace of the world order represents an essential condition for maintaining international stability. The Chinese-brand new economic initiative is supposed to contribute, on one hand, to a further shifting of the gravity center of the world economy and, on the other hand, to expanding intercontinental trade flows. The heightened awareness over this economic plan is produced not only by its range but also by the vague attitude toward the likely member countries. The doubts that revolve around it allows than pundits, scholars, or thinkers to give the world positive or negative interpretations of the BRI. China attempts to extend the reach of the BRI by raising the number of feasible or achievable projects performed in member state countries, purposely providing them (to the states) the way to think and develop their investment programs. Nevertheless, the other political and economic benefits of the BRI, moderately outlined in official records and documents, should not be minimized. At the same time, it is important to avoid alarmistic predictions of the development of a new world order and China's hegemonic aspirations. At this stage, the PRC administration comprehends the BRI "as the state ability to resolve crushing obstacles of their socio-economic progress, or as a support for BRI member states for overcoming regional economic/ development shortcomings". Despite their regional goals, neighbouring countries may get new opportunities through BRI. The name of the new Chinese initiative was taken based on past historical record and emphasis on the ideological element of China's current standing.

The metaphorical locution "silk road" concerning international transportation corridors started to be used comparatively recently, and it gained significant attention only in the last part of the XIX century. The BRI concerns the implementation of integration projects with both landlocked and inland countries. Consequently, the origin of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB) and the "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR), is regarded as a natural undertaking of China's implementation of BRI. For the first time, the Chinese administration came up with a design scheme on the formation of the SREB and the MSR in September – October 2013. The two came into being throughout the visits of China's President Xi Jinping, to Kazakhstan and Indonesia. Speaking at Nazarbayev University, he stated "joint efforts to create the Silk Road Economic Belt, which ... will be very beneficial to the people of all countries," and in a speech, at the 2013 APEC summit in Indonesia, called on the countries of Southeast Asia to promote and support the idea of the "Maritime Silk Road". In 2014, the notion of "BRI" was officially defined as the key component of China's foreign policy. It was created to assure the achievement of China's regional and global long-term development strategy, as presented by Xi Jinping at the end of

2012. Just two weeks after taking office, Xi Jinping did show the country's development plan for decades to come, proclaiming it the "dream of a great revival of the Chinese nation" –or the China Dream (Xing Li, 2015). As from 2021, this plan is supposed to transform the Chinese nation into a "society of shared prosperity", and by 2049 - "a rich and powerful, democratic and modern socialist state" (Xinhua, 2017).

The key provisions of the BRI initiative were published the first time in March 2015 with the approval of the State Council of the PRC. The work plan explains in broad form the BRI's beliefs, potential routes, mechanisms, and preferences for cooperation. Among the latter, interstate coordination of economic policy, the modernization of transportation infrastructure, the increase of commerce and joint investment, commercial integration, and the improvement of humanitarian relations were the most emphasized. BRI, also, is meant to convince the rulers of nearby countries that China does not have pragmatic or utilitarian purposes and is very committed, sometimes in a bombastic method like "(the BRI) embodies the dream of the world community and its desire for the beautiful" and will become a "significant contribution to the development of mankind", to share the great benefits of the "project of the century"(Cheng Guoqiang, 2015). Although it seems a bit ironic, most Chinese specialists partake in the official position. They highlight the full of China's respect of the interests of associate countries, Beijing adherence to the principles of equity and mutual good, and, which is more powerful, the non-interference and neutrality in the domestic affairs of member states. Following Xi Jinping, specialists contradict premises on China's hidden geopolitical goals, including the will of its leadership to design zones of influence or expand its position in worldwide. The development programs of the BRI are deemed to be broad in scope and they can be adjusted according to the choices of the partner countries. In 2015, Xi Jinping called them "a real choir of all states, not just China's solo", and Chinese leaders and specialists then developed this catchword into the idea of a "symphony" of equal partner countries. Considering China's economic power, its role as a connecting country in the framework of the initiative is thoroughly undeniable: it accounts for up to 17% of world GDP, 13% of exports and 10% of imports.

The scale of the BRI is one of the foremost aspects of the initiative. It is considered that it will include at least 60 countries with a total population of more than 4 billion people whose total GDP is \$ 21 trillion. The energetic program began to promptly come true. After a few months following XI's visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia,

the number of the ready investment agreements reached 300. As stated in the State Council of the PRC, the size of investments should reach \$ 4 trillion in the next years. From mid-2016, official Chinese experts have stated that partner countries have performed over 900 projects worth \$ 890 billion.

On the other hand, the BRI Initiative is still devoid of specificity and sets only a generic frame, which is why it is only vaguely interpreted by the pundits and global experts. But overall, the BRI's goal is quite obvious- to design a novel concept/image of China, aiming to join as many countries as possible with its idea. This serves the idea of the Chinese leadership to maintain its eagerness to consider multiple options for trade and investment cooperation with partner countries. Further, the struggle between manufacturing and infrastructure projects proposed to partner countries secure meaningful political and economic advantages to China, as well as strengthening its negotiating position at the regional level.

Because BRI has to deal with different countries (considering a series of facts, like the development or corruption level to name a few), then BRI is not only a simple policy but rather a complex set of diverse laws, customs, and dispositions that develop a new business climate in every member state.

How the BRI has developed since its Inception?

The prosperous growth of the BRI projects will need economic, institutional, and governmental assistance from both sides- China and the BRI member states connected with the projects. The beginning of the BRI can be known with the portrayal of a regional collaboration project between Beijing and the "Stans" states, as it was expressed by the Chinese government in 2013.

Considering the aforementioned plan, which was called The Silk Road Economic Belt, it was introduced by President Xi to the Kazakhstan people throughout an established visit to that country in September 2013. The conference was held in Astana. Xi Jinping stated at the time that, besides of the BRI's value for the global development, "China will never intervene in internal affairs of Central Asian countries, seek leadership in regional affairs, or operate sphere of influence".

A few months later in 2013, President Xi holds another speech this time before the Indonesian Parliament where he proposed to the Central Asian states a similar frame for regional cooperation, naming it 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. For the next two years, the Chinese government developed a combination of both projects to

arrange them into a particular political idea. As a result of the Chinese authorities' effort to make a clear and genuine concept, the economic initiative was named the "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2015.

As part of national development policies, the BRI's main priority is to drive a part of BRI projects to the lagging areas of China, such as Xinjiang and Tibet (placed in the western area of the country) as an objective to increase connectivity between East and border regions with Central Asia. So, the BRI can be identified as a vehicle built to carry out regional or trans-continental cooperation.

The BRI comprises 64 nations, located largely in Asia, Africa, and Europe, which means 4,4 billion people or 63% of the world population. However, China has developed several goals as far as the BRI is concerned. The primary aspiration of the BRI has been related to strengthening collaboration and interdependence relationships between China and its Neighbours' states (taking into consideration the two separatist regions like Xinjiang and Tibet). To this effect, the BRI's global scope is subordinated to the regional one or, in other words, to those projects that are generated in the Eurasian space. The BRI is an economic and political concept that is still not entirely defined. Considering its evolution so far, it seems to be an umbrella concept that covers various types of projects. For instance, the BRI is not confined only to infrastructure projects or trade cooperation, but rather to projects that concern cultural exchanges, or security issues.

The BRI is an outcome that has been driven by domestic and outside political and economic reasons. At the domestic level, the BRI-related projects originate in two essential aims: to solve the excess production capacity issue and second, the process of economic modernization to consolidate its international (world power) status. At the foreign level, the BRI was meant to be an answer to US mega-regional integration projects such as the TPP and the TTIP. None of the two American-proposed trade initiatives are available at the date of writing of this essay. Well, the Trans-Pacific Partnership has been rebranded as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership/but casually it's still using the same name as TPP. It should be considered that the BRI comprises nations that have been excluded from the TTIP or TPP such as those belonging to Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, and some European countries that are not yet EU's member states.

What are BRI most Important Five Economic Goals:

1. Through BRI, China intends to export its surplus in productive capacity. In other words, developing infrastructure schemes all over the world will help China to fix its excess production capacity issues;
2. China is planning to turn parts of its 3 trillion foreign currency reserves towards countries that are in dire need of infrastructure development. In the long run, China will contribute to regional states' economic rise and global economic growth, too;
3. BRI infrastructure projects can help China to assure an important diversification of its energy suppliers so that Beijing would be less reliant on the Middle East energy markets. Focusing on improving relations with Central Asia's states and Russia, for instance, Beijing is looking for overcoming its energy burdens;
4. There is a precise connection between the implementation of BRI projects and the lack of stability in China's border provinces such as Xinjiang or Tibet. However, the industrial growth of China's western regions would mean the establishment of a reciprocal development pole to the modern regions settled in China's east coast. China's west coast development plans may reduce people's dissatisfaction regarding their region's lack of development and to a certain extent the security issues (Xinhua, 2017).

The BRI in the Context of COVID-19 Outbreak

COVID has been developing as a turning point in modern history that emphasizes the start of a new era. The world is going to be changed dramatically because of the spreading of the new virus that could not be halted by world scientists so far. The question down the road will be for sure about the resilience of the world economic system and by the strength of the world order. Which one will be down first? But also, which particular international actors/ states will be going to support both of them? Is China ready to take the USA international duties over by itself or will it be a Sino-American shoulder to shoulder work? Perhaps both states may have the means to do it, but what they lack is the presence of two strong-minded leaders. At the time of the COVID broke, the two leaders just passed the buck to one another and rejecting the existence of it, instead of warning their people against the virus. The costs are abysmally outrageous so far.

In the next two to three years the world will be witnessing three economic-case scenarios. The first one is called an easy-to-recover scenario where the already global financial shaky institutions would promote new recovering strategies. The second

scenario is gripped by the degree of most developed countries' involvement in helping others to recover. That's may be a very effective scenario as long as those helping countries are not suffering many COVID-casualties and their economy will (re)work as it did it before the virus. At the time of writing, the second scenarios seem also hard to be achieved because the USA is coping with the biggest number of infected people – 1,3 million people¹- and also with the biggest death toll – 81,500 thousand people². China has better stats regarding those above-mentioned issues than the USA, but the virus is still spreading around China, and new cases have reappeared in Wuhan since the lockdown was lifted a month ago (Voytko, 2020). Other sources reveal that there are 6 new cases in Wuhan (Moritsugu, 2020). In the light of new cases revealed, there are rumours that the authorities are going to test the entire population of Wuhan in only 10 days (Moritsugu, 2020).

The third case is the worst for every country. That is, the spreading of COVID would not be diminished, and the lockdowns will be presumably extended. The natural answers to the above mentioned are that the world economies will be down, and the social unrest would rise at least in poor and developing countries. For keeping a tight rein on social unrest, social welfare can be a good tool for those that have been gotten laid-off so that they may go easier through this killing-economy time. However, there are countries like China, that cannot grant social welfare for those who have not enough time working as an employee or economic help is lesser than expected. So on, China will not have to deal only with those who are living in extreme poverty but also with those people that have lost their jobs recently. There have been arising a lot of protests in China so far, but many of them have been suppressed by authorities (Hernández, 2020).

The three scenarios raise more questions. To what degree the international institutions (financed by states) will be able to help to economic recovery. China's GDP has been falling for more than 2 years in a row, so the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) projects will have to deal with economic shortcomings. Before the COVID-19 eruption, there were talkings regarding the total amount of money Asia needs for reducing the developmental gap. So, the Asian Development Bank talked about 26 trillion of \$ till 2030 so that Asian countries to achieve the developmental needs (ADB, 2017). As far as we know, some BRI countries, like Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, the Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, are already

¹ The worldwide number of COVID-infected people – available at [<https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en>].

² *Ibidem*.

indebted because of BRI high-interest rates. More than sure their economy will be affected due to the big expenses made during the pandemic. How China is going to protect its investments in those countries heavily economic-burdened?

However, China should revise its Belt and Road strategy toward the member states because the COVID-19 implies not only economic risks but also a health hazard. That is, China should commence Health Belt and Road Strategy as a logical extension to BRI so that not to expose economically and healthy too much the other countries. Regarding the health hazard, most of the BRI projects outside China have been implemented by the Chinese contractors along with Chinese workers, this becoming the reason for freezing many projects along the BRI routes (Lancaster *at.all*, 2020).

But though China has done a lot of great work providing 30 million \$ to World Health Organisation and sending medical equipment to countries such as Iran, Iraq, Italy, Pakistan, Laos, and the Philippines, or its doctors' knowledge to countries that were at the beginning of COVID-outbreak, too (Lee, 2020). The financial help to the World Health Organisation came due to the memorandum of cooperation on public health that China signed with WHO in 2017 (BAIJIE, 2017). If China is still going to provide money and medical expertise support for those countries that have been hit hardest till present, then COVID-19 means China's chance to show the world its leadership skills during a time crisis. Though China is willing to give a hand to the nations in troubles, some of the medical equipment they sent in Europe was rejected as improper.

But still, China has a lot of domestic problems. Moreover, China's 2020 first-quarter GDP rise is expected to be 9% or 10% weaker than the 2019 first-quarter GDP that had grown by 6,4%, more they expected at that time (Crossley, 2020). However, China's debt has almost doubled since the 2008 economic crash. If China's 2008 economic debt was 140% than in 2017 it was 257% of GDP value and is still deepening since the COVID-outbreak (Leng, 2018). Those figures are extremely important because they assure CCP legitimacy/ remaining in power.

More international projects may be cancelled or stopped until China can overcome pandemic-tied issues. However, if China is facing economic downturns then what is going to happen with those BRI poor member states that have been not able to repay their loans or those that have signed contracts with 5% until 7% interests? Will China take advantage of Sri Lankan natural resources as in the Kenyan cases? (Abi-Habib, 2018; Huang, 2018).

China is not burdened only by domestic, medical, or BRI-implementing projects issues, but also by its realpolitik behaviour in the South China Sea. Using COVID-19 as cover-excuse, China has revendicated two administrative parts of two islands -Paracel and Spratly- long claimed by many Asian states. The two districts are under Sansha City's administrative rule (Vu, 2020).

Hanoi administration has risen complaints against China's assertive recently moves, the reason is supported by the earlier this month sinking of the Vietnamese fishing boat by the Chinese guard coast, too (Smith, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the Philippines has made no complaint about China's actions in Manila-claimed Fiery Cross Island. Not to mention that China has built two more research stations on Manila-claimed Fiery Cross and Subi Reef (West Philippine Sea) (CNN Philippines, 2020). It is also worth mentioning that in the event of a conflict China may use those already occupied islands as military bases for quick mobilization of the People's Republic of China's army. Considering the AD/A2 fixed facilities on those islands, China can reject any enemy intrusion in the South China Sea. Adding to those from above, Beijing launched its second aircraft carrier even in the mid of pandemic. As a response to China's South China Sea aggressive behaviour, the USA and Australia have teamed up for a joint drill in the South China Sea.

However, it is completely startling international organizations' lack of response to China's air and naval harassment against its neighbours. China's disturbing behaviour has hit highs even towards developed countries, like Japan, because Beijing had been more than 1000 inroads in Japan's territorial waters in 2019 (Japan Times, 2019).

If many pundits have blamed China on using the virus for covering his outrageous South China Sea actions (Japan Times, 2020), then we have to say that the USA also has increased its activity in the South China Sea and Taiwan Street. Instead of joining forces, both states have chosen to far to fight, so far (Al Jazeera, 2020).

If the other states directly prejudiced by China occupying the two disputed islands are not protecting their claims, then that's may mean they agree Beijing's actions in the South China Sea or acknowledge Beijing supremacy over there. Overall, as important are their (lack of) actions after the end of COVID-19.

The Chinese Communist Party is badly under pressure because the exports will be going very badly in the short run, too. As the two most important Chinese market destinations, the USA and European economies are doing their best for overtaking

the COVID, so the Asian markets will be severely hit. More than that, the USA criticizes China for spreading misinformation on COVID-outbreak (Xie, 2020). On the other hand, China points a finger to the USA blaming them for the possibility of bringing the virus into Wuhan city (Xie, 2020). Perhaps, those diplomatic spats were driven by the unfinished trade-war disputes, also.

It is worth mentioning the European Union soft voice over China's misinformation regarding the COVID-outbreak. According to international outlets, European Union wrote a report about states' struggles concerning the spreading of information on coronavirus pandemic (Apuzzo, 2020). But Brussels wrote again this report concerning China's (dis)information activity, softening the voice this time after being pressured by China. Not only the European Union seems to be China-centric, but also, in the words of Donald J. Trump, the World Health Organisation. Trump has decided to stop the USA financial contribution to the WHO because of the latter lack of will to share the information on COVID spreading (Churchill & Delaney, 2020).

As a result of Trump's decision, China decided to grant an extra 30 million \$ to the WHO. Even Mike Pompeo had an unbalanced intervention proclaiming that China carries the blame for the lab-made **virus (Borger, 2020)**. On the other hand, the misinterpretations of facts -especially by high officials, spread then on mass media may come very dangerous because it can commence a wave of hate. Remember Bush Jr.'s 2003 Iraq rhetoric making American people believe that S. Hussein was carrying the entire blame for the "nine-eleven" (Odell & Wertheim, 2020).

Nevertheless, China has played the COVID-card better than the USA did it. Washington has failed to provide its soft power to the world during this pandemic, while China has offered medical equipment, although some countries have rejected it as being counterfeit, has faked its COVID-stats, or even it has been involved in solid propaganda about its glorious actions in containing the spreading of the corona. All in all, China wants to be seen as a benign actor, trying to conceal its earlier failures. On the other hand, China's recently pandemic-related actions cannot be considered as being soft-power because it is immoral to put shoulder to shoulder propaganda and soft power. There are a few arguments wherefore the USA will fix its economy faster than China. China has a lot of territorial disputes, while the USA has friendly neighbours. Besides that, while China is an energy-addicted actor being forced to use travel channels like the Persian Gulf or the Indian Ocean for getting it, the USA has transformed itself from an energy importer to an energy exporter. For

instance, there are shreds of evidence that China has amassed more than 750 million barrels of oil since the virus outbreak.

At the domestic level, some estimations reveal that China has been losing more than 5 million jobs since the COVID-outbreak (Cheng, 2020). According to some pundits' insights, "China may lose about 22 million jobs and only half of them are eligible for state help" (Crossley & Leng, 2020). Also, at the domestic level, and amid the COVID-crisis, China is involved in indirect discrimination against the foreign population, especially those from Africa. Some of them were evicted from their Guandong-flats, another has been forbidden from entering shops or restaurants. China sees foreigners as a vehicle of virus- advancement. Moreover, others are banned from entering their work-office, or fellow passengers are getting off the busses when they get in. As a result, African countries issued a joint communique where they criticized China's racist behavior or rather its ignorance. But that's nothing new considering the 2019 indictment of two Australian and Swedish (both having Chinese roots) citizens allegedly for espionage allegations, breaking, therefore, international norms on human rights. However, on the international stage arose a lot of rumours about what Xi knew, and most important how he dealt with the virus during the period when it broke out and the day China acknowledged to the world that the virus is highly contagious. In the aftermath of COVID-19-outbreak-prone-lockdown, the Chinese people got very angry but the officials' luck of not turning it into a turmoil was the other countries failure to halting the spreading of virus and the toll death. At the end of COVID-19 in China, if any, Xi Jinping may be glorified forever for his brave actions in countering the virus in China, even if there are doubts regarding the truthfulness China gave to the world considering the spreading of COVID-19. Ironically, if American scientists will succeed in handling the death toll, perhaps Donald Trump may capitalize on their struggle in his November-presidential elections, using then China as a campaign strategy. Trump also seeks to take advantage of the conservative outlets' releases. Some outlets, like Fox News, praise Trump for cutting off the WHO payment. Considering Trump's bucking blame on China's virus narratives, more than 77% of Americans are convinced by Beijing's culpability on COVID spreading. But using mass media as a tool to pass the virus outbreak responsibility, either we speak about China or the USA, only may alienate the allies from them.

The COVID-19 has revealed that every state/actor is on its own emphasizing, therefore, the absence of a common regional (at least) stand against the financial losses or virus-widening. As a natural result, almost every European Union member

state, for instance, chose an individual approach for getting rid of the COVID-19 and also for downsizing economic reduction. Economic contraction is the states' biggest issue for centuries. So, the pandemic-receipt might disclose more states on the brink of economic or political collapse, or perhaps even failed states. So far not good. None of the developed states have prompted any strategy for saving those comrades already heavily indebted. More than ever the pillars (states) of global leadership have turned inward. The American 3M company stopped exporting masks due to the orders that had come from Washington. Only after angry protests, Washington loosened the curtailment. Unfortunately, the European Union did the same. Regrettably, most developed states have used beggar-thy-neighbour policy, which can end dramatically for less developed states.

The novel virus has revealed international organizations' vulnerabilities. As we know so far, the World Health Organization has had a very slow reaction to the COVID-19, perhaps because it is under heavy political pressure.

However, if history has a cycle character then the end of pandemic should bring about new arrangements ready to promote prosperity or ready-to-use strategies for keeping in rein new viruses down the road. But if we look at the last pandemic- the 1918 Spanish flu- scenario, then we are going to understand that nothing is going to change on the international stage. Perhaps, citizens may reject globalization, and they may look for more protection from their governments.

Conclusions

Without a doubt, Covid-19 has hit very hard China so far. In the same train of thought, the Belt and Road Initiative will still be the main focus point of CCP. More important than that is Beijing's short-term and long-term response to the domestic problems, as the containing of the virus, fixing the health sector, and diminishing the economic fallout. However, the BRI may be in standby for the next months, or even years, due to the need to cover the internal needs. At the time, there is a high potential for the digital sector of BRI to be capitalized on.

References

Abi-Habib, Maria (2018). How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>.

Al Jazeera (2020). US warship sails through Taiwan Strait amid tensions with China. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/warship-sails-taiwan-strait-tensions-china-200326010625456.html>.

Apuzzo, Matt (2020). Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report on Covid-19 Disinformation. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/world/europe/disinformation-china-eu-coronavirus.html>.

Asian Development Bank (2017). Asia Infrastructure Needs Exceed \$1.7 Trillion Per Year, Double Previous Estimates. *Asian Development Bank*. <https://www.adb.org/news/asia-infrastructure-needs-exceed-17-trillion-year-double-previous-estimates>.

Baijie, AN (2017). WHO, China sign pact establishing 'health Silk Road'. *ChinaDaily*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm.

Borger, Julian (2020). Mike Pompeo: 'enormous evidence' coronavirus came from Chinese lab. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/mike-pompeo-donald-trump-coronavirus-chinese-laboratory>.

Cheng, Evelyn (2020). Roughly 5 million people in China lost their jobs in the first 2 months of 2020. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/16/china-economy-millions-lose-their-jobs-as-unemployment-spikes.html>.

Cheng, Guoqiang (2015). The Belt and Road - A Mission to Benefit Two-Thirds of the World. *Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development*, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2015--issue-no4/the-belt-and-road--a-mission-to-benefit-two-thirds-of-the-world->

Churchill, Owen & Delaney, Robert. Coronavirus: Donald Trump halts US contributions to World Health Organisation during 'review'. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3079929/coronavirus-us-senators-demand-who-records-saying-health>.

CNN Philippines (2020). China puts up new research stations on PH-claimed reefs in West Philippine Sea. *CNN Philippines*. <https://bit.ly/2Ns45w9>.

Crossley, Gabriel & Leng, Cheng (2020). Coronavirus pandemic to test China's unemployment safety net. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-unemployment/coronavirus-pandemic-to-test-chinas-unemployment-safety-net-idUSKCN21U0Y0>.

Crossley, Gabriel (2020). *Virus had 'eye-popping' impact on China's economy: Beige Book Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-business/virus-had-eye-popping-impact-on-chinas-economy-beige-book-idUSKBN21A3R9>.

Danner, Lukas K. (2018). *China's Grand Strategy: Contradictory Foreign Policy?* Palgrave Macmillan.

Hadley, Stephen J. (2014). America, China and the 'New Model of Great-Power Relations'. *Lowy Institute*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/america-china-and-new-model-great-power-relations>.

Hernández, Javier C. (2019). Workers' Activism Rises as China's Economy Slows. Xi Aims to Rein Them In. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/asia/china-workers-protests.html>.

Herscovitch, Benjamin (2017). A Balanced Threat Assessment of China's South China Sea Policy. *CATO Institute, Policy Analysis* No. 820.

Huang, Kristin (2018). Will China seize prized port if Kenya can't pay back its belt and road loans? *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/2180026/will-china-seize-prized-port-if-kenya-cant-pay-back-its-belt>.

Huang, Y. (2016). Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment. *China Economic Review*, 40, pp. 314–321.

Lancaster, Kirk; Rubin, Michael & Rapp-Hooper, Mira (2020). What the COVID-19 Pandemic May Mean for China's Belt and Road Initiative, *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-covid-19-pandemic-may-mean-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

Lee, Se Young (2020). China pledges \$30 million more for WHO's coronavirus fight, *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-who/china-pledges-30-million-more-for-whos-coronavirus-fight-idUSKCN2250VM>.

Moritsugu, Ken (2020). China Makes Plans to Test All of Wuhan Amid Fears of Virus Comeback. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/china-makes-plans-to-test-all-of-wuhan-amid-fears-of-virus-comeback>.

Odell, Rachel & Esplin, Wertheim, Stephen (2020). Can the Democrats Avoid Trump's China Trap? *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/opinion/china-coronavirus-trump.html?fbclid=IwAR3CGQoKhWzpiv2UG3P_Eo8MI7bIEiRBcUk3aXMr_JzeF5Q0f7TNOz2RzI.

Sidney, Leng (2018). Caught in China's cash crunch: why private companies are collapsing into a black hole of shadowy debt, *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/2155706/caught-chinas-cash-crunch-why-private-companies-are-collapsing>.

Smith, Nicola (2020). Vietnam lodges protest against Beijing's expansion in South China Sea. *The Telegraph*. [shorturl.at/gyPX2](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/vietnam/13771811/vietnam-lodges-protest-against-beijings-expansion-in-south-china-sea/).

Sonnad, Nikhil (2015). Xi Jinping's first UN address. *QUARTZ*. (<https://qz.com/512886/read-the-full-text-of-xi-jinpings-first-un-address/>).

The Japan Times (2019). Chinese incursions near Japan-held islands top 1,000 to hit record, up 80% on last year. *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/12/06/national/politics-diplomacy/china-incursions-japan-held-islands-hit-record/>.

The Japan Times (2020). China to conduct major military drill simulating seizure of Taiwan-held island. *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/14/asia-pacific/china-military-drill-taiwan/>.

Voytko, Lisette (2020). China Reports First New COVID-19 Case in Wuhan. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisettevoytko/2020/05/10/china-reports-first-new-covid-19-case-in-wuhan/#5504b8fe7071>.

Vu, Khanh (2020). Vietnam protests Beijing's expansion in disputed South China Sea. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-expansion-in-disputed-south-china-sea-idUSKBN2210M7>.

Xiaoxiong, Yi (2005). Chinese foreign policy in transition: understanding china's "peaceful development". *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 74-112.

Xie, Echo (2020). We are not the culprit': Beijing tells US to stop blaming China for coronavirus pandemic. *South China Morning Post*. <https://bit.ly/3etta5z>.

Xing, Li (2015). Interpreting and Understanding "The Chinese Dream" in a Holistic Nexus". *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, pp. 2-4, DOI: 10.1007/s40647-015-0098-3.

Xinhua (2017). Xi unveils plan to make China "great modern socialist country" by mid-21st century", *Xinhua*, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688933.htm

Xinhua, 2017, "New five-year plan brings hope to China's west", *Xinhua*, 2017, http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2016/12/27/content_281475526349906.htm#:~:text=China%20launched%20its%20%E2%80%9Cgo%20west,more%20than%20400%20million%20people.

Zhai, F. (2018). China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Preliminary Quantitative Assessment. *Journal of Asian Economics*, 55, pp. 84-92.

Zhai, F. (2018). China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Preliminary Quantitative Assessment. *Journal of Asian Economics*, 55, pp. 84-92.