



On Chinese Hegemony in Africa's Development Agenda: A Critical Perspective on the Belt and Road

Diemas Sukma Hawkins¹

official.diemashawkins@gmail.com

Abstract

Using Cox's Critical Theory of Hegemony and the Three Categories of Forces, this paper analyzes China's strategy in developing a Sino-centric development agenda in Africa. First, it explores the history of China's relationship with Africa and the shift from China's relative isolationist approach to foreign policy to a more active role in global governance. Second, it explores the institutions developed in the twenty-first century that can support China's global agenda such as BRICS, the African Union, and the Belt and Road, as well as the financial architecture China attempts to establish for an alternative global financial system. Finally, the paper explores China's use of its material capabilities such as its financial wealth, industrial capabilities, and technological advancement to reshape Africa in a way that benefits its interests.

Keywords: China; African Union; Belt and Road; Economic Development

INTRODUCTION

In the first year since he rose to power as the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping outlined that China had needed to step away from its predecessor's idea of traditional Chinese foreign policy which had long followed a doctrine of relative isolationism. President Xi iterated that "China needed to learn more about the world, and that vice versa the world needed to learn more about China."

It wouldn't be until a state visit to Kazakhstan that President Xi would unveil little by little what this new Chinese foreign policy doctrine would look like. During a state visit to the new Kazak capital of Astana, President Xi made a visit to Nazarbayev University, where he laid out his idea of the "promotion of people-to-people friendship to create a better future" (Frankopan, 2018). It was in this speech that President Xi proposed his vision for a new Chinese global policy that emphasized connecting China to the greater world, beginning first with its closest neighbors. President Xi stressed the historical context of Chinese foreign relations of the ancient world connected by the fabled *silk road*. He placed an emphasis in the role that the

¹ Prodi Hubungan Internasional, Universitas Pertamina



silk road played in bringing new opportunities to trade and work together, and that “people of completely different races, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development.” This would lead to the unveiling of President Xi Jinping’s grand international strategy of a “Silk Road Economic Belt”. During a state visit to Indonesia, President Xi expanded on this idea to include a proposed “Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road”.

These two proposals then became known as the “One Belt One Road” or simply Belt and Road Initiative or BRI. The BRI aims to improve global investments into infrastructure and trade in Africa, Europe, and Asia, in a concerted effort to increase global economic growth and development (Githaiga et al, 2019).

The project has now become a foreign policy priority for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has been observed as having a strategic and comprehensive scope which is essential to the CCP’s twin objectives of achieving national rejuvenation and restoration of China as a Great Power (Nantulya, 2019; Githaiga et al., 2019). In 2017, the BRI was incorporated into the Constitution of the CCP under President Xi’s move to established “Xi Thoughts” as the guiding principle of the party similar to Mao Zedong’s reign. The policy builds on former CCP leader President Jiang Zemin’s policy of expanding Chinese construction investments overseas under the “Going Global Strategy” (Garlick, 2024). The stated objective of the BRI is to “construct a unified large market and make full use of both international and domestic markets, through cultural exchange and integration, to enhance mutual understanding and trust of member nations, resulting in an innovative pattern of capital flows, talent pools, and technology databases (“The fifth anniversary”, 2018). This was publicly reiterated in the 2015 document outlining the BRI’s goals titled *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road* which mapped six economic corridors for trade and investment connectivity that would be implemented (Garlick, 2024).

In the decade that it has operated, the BRI has accounted for 60% to 75% of the world’s total population, attributing to over half of the world’s Gross Domestic Product, affecting 35% of the global economy and 40% of international trade spanning over 154 affiliated countries which have signed Memorandums of Understanding with China to enter into the project (Nedopil, 2023; World Bank, 2019; Caridi, 2023; Osborne et al., 2021; Hawkins et al. 2022). This centerpiece in Chinese foreign policy has become paramount to China’s major country diplomacy strategy that attempts to raise China’s standing on the global order. . It is difficult to put into picture just how massive the sheer size and scale of China’s BRI is and the projects within as it takes on infrastructure development on a global scale which we simply have never seen before (Hao et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2022). The project has grown from its infancy to a tune of an initial investment commitment of \$1 trillion USD and doubling its country partnerships, and as such it has regarded as the most ambitious and extensively coordinated investment plan for the interconnectivity of trade and infrastructure development in modern civilization (Hao et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2021; Hawkins et al. 2022).

China's "soft" political, financial, and civilizational rise has encapsulated the country's most pivotal issues for modern foreign affairs and presented some wide-ranging, complex, and multi-dimensional implications which needs to be further analyzed not just in terms of its tangible repercussions for global stability and security and the geopolitical landscape, but also in how international relations are conducted and conceptualized (Fiaz, 2019; Mahendra et al., 2023). As the BRI continues to take form, in spite of China's looming economic concerns and potential slowdowns exacerbated by the post-pandemic economic recovery, it is important to analyze the past decade of the BRI to see how it has been implemented to get a clearer understanding of how it will evolve moving forward. More importantly, we need to take a step back to analyze the implications of the BRI and how it has pivoted global affairs as China continue to push for a more dominant role in the world order.

China's explicit intentions of evolving into a "global power" has so far been in the back of intellectual debate on the BRI as the bulk of the conversation focuses primarily on more applicable aspects of the BRI and its political and economic ramifications. However, there is a deeper social economic aspect that needs to be put up front in discussing this topic. We need to seriously consider the possibility of a pivot towards a Sino-centric world order and attempt to understand what the characteristics of such a hypothetical shift may be, and the implications it may have on the international system and its structures. China's move to becoming a "norm-setter" is one that needs to be explored, and this paper aims to dive further into how this may take shape through China's most active economic aid activities within the BRI – which on a quantitative basis is on the continent of Africa. Through this, we can explore how China affects the domestic politics as well as the foreign affairs of African nations through its financial aid and institutional processes. By first bringing into context a broader historical, cultural, and social aspect of Sino-African affairs, we can then view it within the level of a state-society analysis through the lens of Cox's Critical Theory to gain a deeper understanding of what a Sino-centric world order might look like from the cases which we can see today. The decade of Chinese hegemony in the African development agenda is one that sheds light on China's global end-goal. By understanding the ideas of Chinese hegemony and its socio-political characteristics, the structures of Chinese-led institutions, and the utilization of China's material capabilities under Cox's three categories of forces; we can better understand how China conducts its foreign policy and economic diplomacy in practice, and the extent to which it affects Africa's behavior in the international system.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

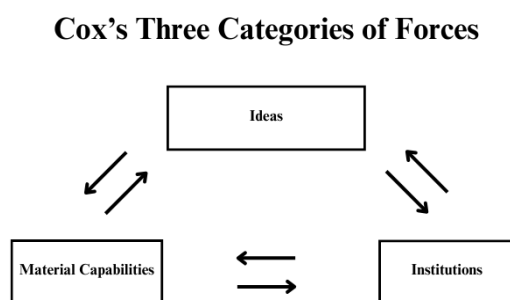
Cox Critical Theory and the Three Categories of Forces

In conducting this analysis of a hypothetical Sino-centric world order which has become increasingly probable within the scope of an ever-expansive Chinese sphere of influence and Chinese-led global institutional architectures, the author will base this research on Cox's distinct approach for IR theory. The paper utilizes what Robert W. Cox coins as the "three categories of forces" which posits that in the international system, there are three forces which influence and are influenced by one another which is steered by a dominant force or

actor: these are ideas, institutions, and material capabilities. This falls in line with Cox's conception of the core theoretical framework of IR is on how we address the relation between social forces and production and how they are linked with the forms of states and world order. Cox argues that to do so we need to look beyond the separation of state and society and see them instead as a conjoined concept of state-society complex as the two have become so *interpenetrated* that in analyzing states in IR it must always relate to how these complexes relate to the different forms of states (Cox, 1981).

Cox had seen that IR theory necessitated a much deeper look into the contradictions which could serve systemic transformation at a time where scholars like Wallerstein focused entirely on state's captivity in the world system which subsequently resulted in a system which structures had the unintended consequences of maintaining these power structures of global capitalism (Cox, 1981; Leysen, 2008). Cox stresses that scholars need to address the problems of world order in a manner which does not perpetuate it by way of considering social forces and processes without overlooking the role of state power (Cox, 1981; Jundana, 2024). To do this, Cox focused on power, development, and global government by observing how social forces and historical circumstances impact the international system and highlights the capacity non-state actors have. For this, Cox proposes three distinct categories of forces which interact in a reciprocal manner that articulates the potential for a reconfiguration in social power (Kusumawardhana, Bainus, and Kantaprawira, 2018). He outlines this in his work where he argues that "...a fit between material power, ideology, and institutions, hegemony may seem to lend itself to a cyclical theory of history; the three dimensions fitting together in certain times and places and coming apart in others." (Cox, 1981). Cox interprets Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony as an interaction between these forces which follow a historical cycle that is flexible in how their dynamics interplay in influencing and being influenced by one another.

Figure 1. Cox's Three Categories of Forces



Cox's three categories of forces are defined as follows:

1. Ideas, which come in the form of intersubjective and collective ideas which hold the role of being interpretations of an actor's subjective worldview, and the development of collective imagines which come in the form of interactions within a system which creates shared meanings that become the foundation of the relationship of actors within the international system.
2. Institutions, which subsequently includes institutional processes which are a tool for stabilization, alignment, and the perpetuation of a social order as they reflect a dynamic

of being subservient to the collective powers which shapes the notion that institutions remain functional at a point in which its usefulness is perceived by its members and subsequently serving as anchors for hegemonic strategies that lend themselves great at representing various interests of its members; providing channels which control internal conflicts to the point of preventing the use of power.

3. Material capabilities, which are a dimension of force with both productive and destructive nature; this comes in the form of a dynamic form which comprises of technological and organizational capabilities, and an accumulated form of natural resources, stock equipment, and the wealth which commands them.

Gramsci's Hegemony and Superstructure

Cox's writing was greatly influenced by Antonio Gramsci, in particular Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. Cox and his critical theory, often times colloquially referred to as an *offshoot* Gramscian or neo-Gramscian approach questions the dominant worldviews which see the global system as an impartial and unbiased stage; Cox argues that the nature of ideas is that they are inherently biased because they are based on a point of origin which have subjective social, political, and historical views. Cox developed on Gramsci's idea of the superstructure – which took Marx's theory of the base and superstructure which had divided society into a base (ie. means of production like tools, land, etc. and relations of production such as capital, private property) and superstructure (ie. everything not directly related to production such as art, culture, religion, law, philosophy, etc.). For Gramsci, and subsequently Cox, the superstructure can be divided into the form of political society which are organized forces of society such as the military and police, and the form of civil society which are the consensus-creating elements which contribute to cultural hegemony such as the media and education system.

Cox viewed that like Gramsci's argument of hegemony being similar to Lenin's idea of a proletariat dictatorship which serves as a dominant (dictating) and directing (leading with consent) class, and also referencing Machiavelli's *The Prince* which saw power through a “revolutionary and continued dialogue with a *prince's* base of support”, within the scope of the international system hegemonic classes are state-society ruling groups which establish and maintain its ruled through a sort of manufactured consent in which cultural and intellectual ideals are established to secure periods of stable rule (Cox, 1981; Gramsci, 1971; Machiavelli; 1513; Lenin, 1982). This, according to Cox, would be achieved through the dominant control over the three categories of forces which establishes and perpetuates hegemony over the international system and the structures shaped to maintain this hegemony.

Neocolonialism

In the past decade, a rising literature on the BRI has been on the concept of the nature of China's economic aid and whether or not in its practice, China has implemented policies which can be reflected as neo-colonialist. There are increasing opinions which view the BRI as a “debt-trap” and a fixture in a controversial foreign policy strategy of China known as the “salami slicing strategy.” This is a geopolitical strategy adopted by China which involves it taking a series of small steps which accumulates into a larger gain which would have originally been difficult or unlawful to perform all at once. This can be examined in China's annexation of disputed territories and its control over critical resources and strategic infrastructure outside

of its sovereign territories. The neologism concept of debt trap was first coined by Brahma Chellaney and viewed China's aid practices as harmfully targeting states which could not justifiably take on the debt and thus placing them in a position becoming subservient to China's will; this has been loosely characterized as neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism or a continuation or reimposition of imperial powers over a smaller dominion (Brautigam, 2020; Chellaney, 2013).

Neocolonialism itself was first coined by former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, which saw neocolonialism as the "final stage of imperialism", borrowing ideas from Lenin, that placed the expansive dimensions of the world order and global financial architecture which concentrates finance-capital in the hands of a few actors which create an extensive network of close ties which place capitalism against one another and partition the world and how states rule over each other under the guise of something which in its essence is still imperialism – President Nkrumah highlights that this form of imperialism is the worst as it results in power without responsibility over those they exploit without redress (Lenin, 1917; Nkrumah, 1965; Douglas, 2012; Rahaman et al., 2017). Neocolonialism does not have a *set* definition, but it can be understood as the control of less-developed countries by the developed world through indirect means, which in this sense refers to how the developed world takes advantage of developing countries by dominating them indirectly through capital, cultural, or political means which allows for a colonial-like exploitation without the use of direct subjugation which would traditionally place the imperial power responsible for the welfare of the states they hold dominion over (Halperin, 2024.; Rahaman et al., 2017).

RESEARCH METHOD

The author conducted this research by utilizing qualitative methods. Qualitative research methods have become popular for social sciences which aim to understand something from every aspect of it and the context which it is experienced (Moloeng, 2007). It is regarded as the best methodology to adopt when examining human life and behaviors for cases with limited scopes as it is contextual but in depth and holistic (Kusumawardhana, Bainus, and Kantaprawira, 2018). Qualitative research conducts observations of people within their environment by interacting directly with them and interpreting their opinions about the world which they find themselves in (Nasution, 2003). Papers which utilize qualitative approaches like this paper hold the purpose of gaining a general understanding of social reality from the perspective of its participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Chinese hegemony and social forces of a Sino-centric World Order

Before we can analyze China's strategic force in developing its hegemonic agenda of establishing a Sino-centric world order, we first need to have a clear understanding of world order within this context and the characteristics of the current US-led Western conceptualization of world order. Contemporary IR discourse and more pressingly the media landscape of the twenty-first century has made the concept of "world order" as an ill-defined catchphrase in political discourse alongside its characteristics in the post-Cold War discourse of "multilateralism" and "multiculturalism" (Cox, 1992). However, returning to Cox, he takes on the approach that places the context of these characteristics of world order in its historical

structure; placing this characteristic as both a passive dependent activity as well as a force which shapes world order. World order itself within this context is the nature of entities which constitute power in the international system; it designates a specific configuration of power which is on the global level. Global in this sense, Cox describes as having three components: a global political economy, an inter-state system, and the biosphere of the global ecosystem. These components are autonomous and hold their own dynamics while also interdependent with one another. As such it creates a sort of contradiction amongst the spheres. Multilateralism in itself refers to inter-states relationship dynamics which shift to what is the most convenient and favorable structure which allows the best freedom of capital flows (Cox, 1992; Gardner, 1969).

Configurations of power have shifted throughout history, and the structures of the international system which becomes the ‘arena’ of states change with the evolving dynamics of inter-state relations which have the tendency to reconfigure itself around the most convenient conventional form; in this case it is a duality of the state which can perpetuate a dynamic in the global political system that allows for the best freedom of capital flows, as well as that of states which controls a realm of the global ecosystem biosphere which is strategic – this creates the characteristics of the inter-state system of a specified time period. While these sphere remain autonomous, it can often be found that the most stable forms of world order can be found at periods of time in which a state is able to have unilateral command over all three spheres uncontested, and as such will utilize its control over one aspect of the three spheres to increase its control over the others. It is from this we see historical periods of contesting and stable world orders: from Florence and Venice with their florin and ducat, followed by Spain with the dollar, then briefly the Dutch gulden before cementing in the British Sterling, and finally the United States with the dollar. This represents one of the main characteristics of a world order, which is the emergence of a popular state currency as a means for trade – which we know now as the global reserve currency. But it is not the only aspect in shaping world order.

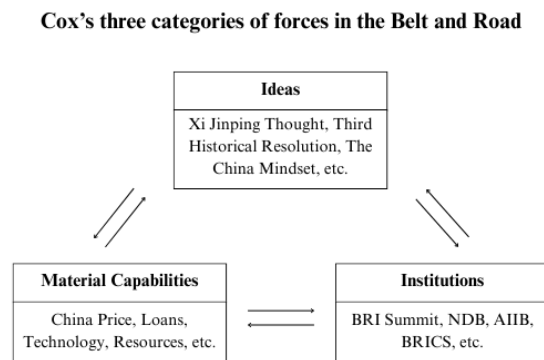
Moving from Cox’s definition of a world order, it then becomes the question of how they rise and fall, and more importantly to the state – how they are maintained. For this, Cox proposed what are the three categories of forces: ideas, institutions, and material capabilities. For the current construction of world order, the author understands that in general the US-led western concept of world order is loosely defined by having the following characteristics:

1. Idea wise, the US version of world order is a neo-liberal world order in which institutions take on structures of democratic processes, and global economic architecture is guided by free trade and open market liberalism.
2. Institution wise, this world order is dominated by three US-controlled organizations which make up the Bretton-Woods System developed from the Washington Consensus, these are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, which serve to keep the global economy in line with the US ideas of world order.
3. Material Capabilities wise, the US world order is strengthened by its technological advantage, industry, control over the monetary system as the reserve currency, and military power as it operates as ‘the world’s police’.

It is from this that we can see China’s emergence as a contesting power becomes an existential threat for the US due to its’ ambitions to rise as a major power threatens to

destabilize US hegemony in the world order. China's characteristics ideologically and practically poses danger to the US neo-liberal order due to the contrasting ideas, institutional processes, and material capacity that differs greatly from that of the US. As such, we now see these two countries as being unable to avoid a collision course which can alter the foundation of the current global governance and world order which the US has spent the last half century building.

Figure 2. Cox's three categories of forces in the Belt and Road



The diagram above illustrates China's three social forces which it utilizes to counter US hegemony to establish its own. In this article we will take a closer look at each of these categories of forces (which Cox expresses as potentials) and analyze how China utilizes them against the US in its pursuit of establishing a new Sino-centric world order through the case of Africa's development agenda and how its strategy in the continent has global repercussions which weakens the US position on the world stage.

The China mindset and ideas of an African development agenda

Through Cox's understanding of ideas as an 'intersubjective meaning' or 'shared notions' of the nature of social relations which perpetuate habits and expectations of behavior (Taylor, 1965; Berger and Luckman, 1971; Cox, 1981). This includes the idea of the state and its organization, the forms of diplomatic relations, and the adherence to certain rules and regulations pertaining to the common interests of all states, as well as the expectations of certain behaviors at times of conflict – aspects which have been conditioned via history. Another form of idea according to Cox is the ideas that are relevant to historical structure which come in the form of 'collective images' of social order held by different groups; these give legitimacy to the nature of prevailing power relations, the idea of justice, and other normative aspects. Where intersubjective ideas are common within historical structures, collective images can be fragmented and diversely opposed to one another.

It is from this understanding of ideas that we see the natural state of the evolving international order to be characterized by a clash of rival collective images that spark the potential for alternative paths of development – a feature which Cox further argues with the role of institutions and material capabilities which alter the structure of the world order.

In understanding China's emergence as a new contesting power for world order, we must bring up the ideas that China brings forward from its domestic politics into its transformed version for global governance. The best way to understand China's idea for world order is to

understand that it will be a reflection of China's own idea of the state and the international system built on domestic interplays of social forces. China has expressed these ideas prominently through three main avenues: the adoption of 'Xi Jinping Thought' as a basis for its global strategy, the adoption of the 'Third Historical Resolution' which cements President Xi's ideas into the CCP's doctrine, and the essence of the intersubjective Chinese mindset.

The most fundamental aspect of collective ideas is its historical context. To understand the China we see today, we need to understand its history, and how in essence, what China adopts as policies today can be interpreted as a *political reflection on trauma*. This refers to China's deep-rooted traumatic history and its social relations with western powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. China's experience in what it refers to as the 'century of humiliation' has shaped a state that has deep experiences of imperialism that generates a certain image of western powers. The opium wars, annexation of Chinese territories, a civil war, a century-long control of Hong Kong and Macau as British and Portuguese dominion, and the contentious straight relations has made China rather isolated in the world order. In a rapidly developing democratic and neoliberal western order, China saw itself continuously isolated and met with an existential threat to its political ideology and very existence as a sovereign state. It's founding leader Mao Zedong centralized control over Chinese political and security apparatus, resulting in policy implementation that saw the death of millions and the stagnation of Chinese industrialization (Hawkins et al., 2022).

From this traumatic history, the new government sought to prevent further isolation of China in the world order as well as prevent the domestic catastrophes of Premier Mao from ever repeating itself, and thus an idea of socialism with Chinese characteristic was born; power sharing structures were implemented, and privatization of certain sectors of China's economy and the slow opening of China to western markets through special economic zones was made possible. These reforms were monumental in building up China's economy which had a late start. China had reluctantly shed its pride from its very namesake in order to secure its survival as a state in a neoliberal world order.² Akin to great powers of the past such as Rome, China attributed their own dominance to a "God-given" ethnic, religious, and cultural superiority (Neftchi, 2017). Now it was seeing a dominant power which behaved in an oppressive manner in a scale which it had never seen before. This was summarized by Gungwu (2011) when he elaborated on China's unpreparedness for the threat of western hegemony:

"When the West came as a powerful and aggressive force with a lot of new armaments, new ideas, and with a missionary instinct to tell the world what is good for them, the Chinese didn't know how to respond because they had not encountered people like that before. So, they were not prepared... and in so far as they have been successful for so long, they had become complacent about their own success and when they were challenged in this very aggressive way by the West they failed to respond adequately and therefore lost everything in the cause of it."

² China's naming origin which stems from the Chinese word 中國 (read as *Zhongguo*) meaning "Middle Kingdom". This notion of China as the "middle kingdom" comes from a certain idea of civilization which places the Chinese lands at the center of the surrounding regions. China in its culture views itself as the geographical embodiment of being the heart of civilization, under a Sino-centric or Sinicized world that includes the entirety of the East Asia region which surrounds it: Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and all forms of culture influenced by China at different points in history.

It was from this historical understanding of power relations in the international system that China sought out to ensure that it would never allow itself to face an existential crisis of this magnitude ever again. Premier Mao reflected on this via his attempt to kick-start Chinese industrial revolution through the failed *Great Leap Forward* and prevent Chinese ideological fragmentation through the brutal *Cultural Revolution* (Hawkins et al., 2022). Meanwhile Deng Xiaoping approached this via the normalization of Sino-Western relations and a guided move towards relative economic liberalization. However, it was President Xi Jinping that initiated China's transformation of its global strategy.

President Xi laid out ideas for a new China which would be revered by the international community as a broker of peace, an economic partner, and a key to development and economic prosperity. President Xi transformed China's isolationism to a leading role in international forums – and the BRI became the centerpiece of this new strategy. President Xi sought out to counter western ideas of neoliberalism and democracy with ideas of pragmatic economics. This lens of pragmatic economics was the idea that trade did not need to be conducted through a global reserve currency but a loose and decentralized use of local currencies. Another feature of this was that aid would be negotiated bilaterally, and not through complex multilateral agreements or rigid institutional processes. This made receiving aid easier and quicker, but it also strayed away from western methods of hegemony which had subjected to financial aid recipients of the Bretton Woods system to political and economic reforms via 'restructurization' and 'conditionality' which changed aspects in a state's domestic affairs such as installing democracy, upholding human rights, strengthening of fair legal systems, and open market liberalization. China's idea of financial aid would instead center around low interest rates and disinterest in local politics and domestic affairs of a recipient state. This made China's alternative to infrastructure investment and financing much more attractive to developing countries – especially amongst authoritarian regimes and democratically backsliding countries in Africa which did not wish to be exploited by the wills of western institutions which posed an existential threat over a states' sovereign control over its territories and resources, and an even greater threat to its ruling government (Hawkins et al., 2022; Aleksia and Bakhtiar, 2023).

It was this alternative idea of diplomatic relations, global financial and monetary architecture, and economic development agenda which made China increasingly popular in Africa. This strategy has been rather effective in securing China's interests in a way that it even creates 'unspoken ideas' that are collectively followed. First, there is the unspoken rule that recipients must adopt a "One China Policy" that delegitimizes Taiwan, and secondly there is the unspoken promise that nations willing to side with China more geopolitically against the US, especially in the United Nations where each country has a single vote, will receive more funding projects from China.

The emergence of Sino-centric institutions in Africa

In order to extend its ideas into the international system, China has utilized several existing institutions as well as developed new ones which serve its interests in global governance. In the landscape of the Belt and Road, three major institutions are seen as the most dominating forces in China's diplomacy and framework for international cooperation: BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the New Development Bank. These three structures challenge the US western hegemony make of the world order both in security and economic fields and has allowed for China to emerge as a leader in the international community

(Anam and Ristiyani, 2018). It is through these institutions China has been successful in utilizing its material capabilities to assert Chinese ideas for a Sino-centric world order.

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has drastically expanded its investments overseas, and Africa has become prime real estate for Chinese financial aid as the emerging countries of the continent with deep histories of colonization remain lagging behind when it comes to infrastructure development (Grimm, 2014; Al-Fadhat and Praetio, 2022). The New Development Bank or BRICS Bank alone funds over 120 projects worldwide which as subdivided into eight different categories: Transport Infrastructure, Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency, Water and Sanitation, Environmental Protection, Social Infrastructure, Digital Infrastructure, COVID-19 Emergency Assistance, and other areas.³ Chinese-led institutions in the BRI has created a global opportunity for Chinese and African firms to participate in transboundary and cross-border projects, facilitated Chinese investment in infrastructural connectivity in developing and emerging markets, and has solidified China's control over natural resources in an effort to help participatory countries partake in massive international projects which speed up the process of internationalization for mutualistic benefits (Li et al., 2019; Rafif and Jianhua, 2017; Yu et al., 2019; Gyamerah et al., 2022).

This has given China immense leverage over Africa's development agenda. By 2018, the combined public debt owed by African states to Chinese creditors had exceeded US\$140 billion, with debt concentrated among a small number of borrowing countries and growing concerns about several states' capacity to service these obligations; raising questions of what the consequences of failure to repay these debts may be if states begin to become delinquent in repayments or even default (Gyamerah et al., 2022). This has raised concerns of China's aid practices as a debt-trap in order to gain other strategic interests in participating countries; the same can be interpreted over China's strategic takeover of Sri Lanka's airport and seaport when the country was unable to repay its debt (Mustikasari, 2021; Wibisono, 2019). This has cemented China's economic aid as a massive material capacity which it exerts through these Chinese-led institutions which creates an existential risk for countries that fall under these debt-traps (Zongwe, 2015). This illustrates China's understanding of the structural power which institutions grant in the international system as it allows for actors to interact and influence one another as conceptualized by Pustovitovskij and Kremer (2011) however as analyzed by Cox, it is the dynamics of these structures which tend to follow a dominating and dominated force.

But however implicit Chinese debt-trap may be in the BRI's funding mechanisms, it still doesn't change that African countries are still participating in the BRI and continue to explore new projects in the region in spite of the awareness they have over this narrative. In essence, countries are consciously choosing to risk falling into Chinese debt-trap over US-led western institutions. This marks a change in sentiments towards the contesting world powers. More and more developing nations are becoming disillusioned by western development and financial regime, and view China's mechanisms for cooperation as more favorable and that the debt-trap in a higher risk tolerance. We can infer from this that as it stands today, developing countries in Africa which are characterized by authoritarian governments of a backsliding democracy in nations with deep-rooted cultural trauma over western colonialism, view China's

³ Based on available public data on the New Development Bank website www.ndb.int

neo-colonialist debt financial architecture as a more favorable arrangement that doesn't create a sort of existential risk to their continued control over domestic affairs and local governments.

Seemingly China's aid framework as a matter of fact benefits from the simplicity of authoritarian forms of government and view them as sort of "easier to deal with" and can go much further in securing external goals outside of investment and economic opportunities. These external goals may include the de-legitimization of Taiwanese sovereignty, the shift of balance in the UN system as more China-friendly, and the strengthening of China's position in global governance to fulfil its goal of establishing a new Sino-centric world order built on top of a new global financial regime and China dominated institutional landscape.

Africa's paradoxical role in strengthening China's material capabilities

In order for China to successfully expand its institutions which serve to permeate its ideas into the world order, China needs to be able to place itself in a leadership position within global governance. To do this, China takes great advantage of its material capabilities. For the BRI, this encapsulates several aspects of Chinese politics, military, culture, and economics. More importantly, China's global strategy in the Belt and Road has created a structure in which foreign resources have shifted hands to China and created a paradoxical role in which foreign assets tend to strengthen China's positioning as if they were China's own material capital. It is this material capacity which China holds that allows for China a means to emerge as a leading world power without necessitating war similar to the context of US emergence over Britain at the end of the nineteenth century (Nye, 2006; Korwa, 2019).

Although it goes without saying that China's military still plays a role in deterring conflict while it takes on this global strategy. China adopts a foreign policy geopolitical strategy which has been named as the "Chinese Salami Slicing" or "*nibbling like a silkworm*", which illustrates how China takes smaller steps in adding to a larger gain which would be difficult or unlawful to perform all at once (Barnett, 2021; Chellaney, 2013; Roverse, 2016; Mollman, 2017). This means that China utilizes its military often in a limited capacity to show force, and that it is more often applied at a later point over a long period when China has made little gains which accumulates over time – this has been China's strategy in territorial disputes such as the South China Sea, Northern Indian border, Tibet, and other regions. Similarly, this has been used in the BRI as Chinese aid gives way for China to take control over strategic resources and infrastructures only after participating countries become delinquent or default on their debt and follow through a debt restructuring process which allows for China to ask for concessions which it would not normally be able to consider under normal circumstances.

The first material capability to consider, is China's culture. This refers to China's expanding go-out policies which expand on Chinese cultural concepts that permeates in China's leading role of developing global governance in a multicultural silk road (Li, 2017; Yuniarto, 2020). China in the BRI asserts its dominance not just in geopolitics and economics but does so in a manner which makes its strategy most palatable for participating countries, by developing a new image of China which cultivates a brand which is more friendly and trustworthy to the international community, creating a manufactured consent to Chinese influence in the region. China understands that in order for it to successfully carry out its diplomacy, it needs to carry out a public diplomacy that raises Chinese tolerance, openness to Chinese business, and a shared perspective on Chinese cooperation; and Yuniarto (2020)

further explains that in doing this China not only considers the targeting of this material capacity to just the government apparatus of partner countries, but even to the general public.

Second, there is China's capital, economic, and technological strength. This comes in three forms: the China Price and financial model, its role in manufacturing as the world's factory floor, China's economic aid arrangements, and the go-out policy for Chinese companies in Asia and Africa. The idea of the "China Price" was born from Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the 1970s and 80s which saw China open its borders to elements of market capitalism in "Special Economic Zones" which were coastal cities in China that became industrial and financial centers. This would develop China into the world's factory floor. The rapid growth of China's economy as it opened up to foreign investors, the adoption of new technologies and manufacturing capital, and the introduction of cheap Chinese labor force to the global market created the "China Price" which is a culmination of what was Chinese political, geographic, and demographic characteristics which became the main driving force of its economic boom in the later half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. China's massive productivity and manufacturing sector, the lax environmental regulation, its skills in piracy and counterfeiting, the absence of worker health and safety regulations, Chinese export subsidies, and its centralized planned industrial development program, and deliberate devaluation of the Chinese Yuan currency had ridden the wave of China's economic globalization and moved western manufacturing including the US' to mainland China (Navarro, 2006).

This power in finance and manufacturing led to China's control over technological development and STEM fields, and the Silk Road is characterized as a digital silk road which is driven by Chinese-led digital transformation in participating countries as it came on top of the race to implement 5G, artificial intelligence and big data (Abdurrohim, 2022). China has risen as a contesting power in the battle for chip and semiconductor manufacturing, and during the COVID-19 pandemic China emerged as a leader in the global COVID vaccine diplomacy which cemented its leadership role during the pandemic at a time when the US pulled out of the World Health Organization and western powers greedily withheld their vaccine stockpile (Azmi et al., 2020)

It was also this economic power which gave China the ability to become one of the world's largest creditors without needing to use third party institutions. In the face of dwindling investments in riskier smaller markets, China adopted a 'patient capital' mindset which took on these risk for international support and access to developing markets potential and resources (Johnston, 2018; Lokanathan, 2020; Widjarnarko, 2023). China saw the value of norm-setting through institutions and developed its own global financial architecture with BRICS, the AIIB, and the NDB which served as a multilayered multilateral strategy which fueled the BRI (Raharyo and Saady, 2020). This threatened not only the three western institutions of the Bretton Woods System, but it also created an existential threat for the US economy as the idea of 'de-dollarization' loomed over the head of US government. China within the last few years alongside BRICS and BRI participant made a concerted effort to stop dependence on the US Dollar for trade. Instead, countries would be trading using their own currency. There is also the possibility of BRICS proposing their own alternative global currency. If this strategy was to succeed, there would be major repercussions to the US economy as it depends on the Dollar's status as the fiat currency or global reserve currency to allow for it to take on massive debt as well as function as the de-facto leader of the current global financial system. Same with the

dethroning of the florin and ducat, gulden, and sterling, de-dollarization threatens US to lose its grip on power as leader of the current construction of contemporary world order.

While the previous three aspects of China's material capabilities as inherently domestic aspects of Chinese capacity to strategically enforce its hegemony, this next aspect demonstrates how China has been able to transform factors of externality as an aspect of its own internal security. This is on the matter of how China through the BRI has allowed for the country to strategically control outposts and critical resources as if it was its own. This has created the state of irony in which African resources have paradoxically served to strengthen China's continued dominance over the continent. This is textbook western colonialism over the global south, however what is different is this time China has done so strategically in a manner which have made these concessions palatable for the countries they dominate. With respect to Chinese neo-colonialism, the unique characteristic of it is that relative to western colonialism, China's version of neo-colonialism goes largely unnoticed, or at least has been met with less criticism from the Global South and much more scrutiny from western powers instead.

For example, China controls most strategic mineral resources like gold, beryllium, zinc, and lead in Madagascar, as well as cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which accounts for 70% of the world's cobalt reserves that are critical to lithium battery production central to the green energy revolution, which has made China a leader in green development strategy (Rio and Firza, 2021; Breuer, 2017). They also have unlimited access to strategic infrastructures such as Gambia's port which creates opportunities for Chinese trade and companies to enter African markets (Samba and Jatta, 2021). While this has been massively criticized by the West for its alleged child labor practices and unfairness to global trade, the DRC instead views this as an arrangement that they are comfortable with. The uniqueness of China's brand of neocolonialism that they are pre-arranged with the consent of governments who view these as a net-positive with tolerable risks. The same could be say for most of BRI participants who see BRI projects and Chinese aid as a net-benefit even with the implicit and explicit risks that come with it. However, it needs to be stressed that at the same time these statements are coming from what are significantly more authoritarian actors in backsliding democracy which sees the benefits of BRI projects as an opportunity to cement their power and legitimacy, as well as a potential source for corruption – which becomes a runaway cost for BRI projects in Africa (Githaiga et al., 2019).

This demonstrates that US and western financial and aid architecture has become very unpopular in the Global South. Even now, the EU is preparing to launch their own version of cooperation in Africa, and the US-led G7 has its 'build back better' program which remains to be seen whether or not it will match the scale of the BRI. Regardless, the fight for influence in the Global South has re-emerged as a second scramble for Africa. However, not all have blindly accepted China's holy mission of southern mutual prosperity, and regional hegemony such as India have risen to act as a counterbalance to Chinese hegemony in the Global South (Fabian, 2018). As such, it remains to be seen whether or not China is eventually successful in its mission to subvert western hegemony and world order and reshape it in its own image. What is not a question is the asymmetric and contradictory manner in which the contemporary order is established that makes an inevitable clash of civilizations in the remaking of world order unavoidable. How China continues to shape its global strategy to challenge the US world order remains as a question which can only be speculated and be answered within time.

CONCLUSION

China's emergence as a rising power in global governance has shifted its global strategy to adopt a new determination in reshaping a more Sino-centric world order to compete with the US-led contemporary world order structures, particularly within the scope of the BRI's development agenda. By employing Cox's Critical Theory of the three categories of forces – ideas, institutions, and material capabilities – the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of China's multifaceted approach to hegemony in the context of Africa's infrastructure development.

The paper highlights the historical evolution of China's relationship with Africa, tracing its shift from a policy of relative isolationism to a more proactive and engaged stance in global affairs. It emphasizes President Xi Jinping's vision of China's role in the world, characterized by mutual learning and connectivity between China and other nations. This vision finds expression in the Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to enhance global investments, infrastructure development, and economic growth across Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Central to the analysis is an exploration of the Chinese-led institutions that support its global agenda such as BRICS, the African Union, and the BRI itself. These serve as platforms which provide frameworks for cooperation, dialogue, and economic collaboration that enables China to expand its influence and advance its interests on the global stage. Additionally, the article delves into China's efforts to establish an alternative global financial system that is exemplified by its initiative in creating financial architectures that facilitate capital flows, technology transfer, and talent exchange.

The study underscores China's utilization of its material capabilities to reshape Africa in ways that serve its own interests. China's financial wealth, industrial capabilities, and technological advancements are leveraged to foster economic development, infrastructure projects, and technological innovation in Africa. While these investments bring opportunities for growth and progress, they also raise questions about power imbalances, dependency, and the long-term implications of China's influence on African economies and societies. Importantly, the article situates the BRI within China's broader foreign policy objectives, as well as its aspirations for national rejuvenation and restoration as a Global Power. The BRI is not simply an economic initiative, but a central pillar of China's major country diplomacy strategy, intended to elevate its standing in the international order and shape a new global narrative.

The analysis in this paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative and its implications. It urges scholars and policymakers to examine the multifaceted dimensions of China's engagement in Africa, considering both the tangible consequences of global security, geopolitics, and economic development, as well as the intangible aspects of cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and the reconfiguration of international relations.

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