

Book Reviews

GERALD CHAN, *Understanding China's New Diplomacy: Silk Roads and Bullet Trains* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2018), pp. 134 + xiv, £ 60, ISBN: 978-1-78811-206-2.

This short work in Elgar's 'New Horizons in East Asian Politics' series addresses an important contemporary issue: how China's high-speed trains, other connectivity projects and related investments constitute the multihued, ambitious 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) project, first announced in 2013, with its alternate title: 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Taken together with China's eco-political actions in Asia, Africa, Europe and even Latin America, especially aid and investments, they are nothing less than a new dimension to China's foreign policy.

The book is tightly organised and well-researched. Most of the short 11 chapters are in point format. Some have 80, 100 and more endnotes. But unfortunately, the information presented is selective, failing to address important issues.

A chapter covering China's high-speed rail projects in other countries speaks of 18 projects in 14 countries estimated to cost US\$1.46 billion. It evokes even a 'dream project', a rail line from Northeast China to New York, via a 200 km rail tunnel linking Siberia with Alaska. But the financial viability or the comparative costs involved is not mentioned. China now has rail connections with an impressive 34 European cities. There is surely a category of goods that benefit from 10-day transit time between China and Europe, but at what cost? Neither in this book nor elsewhere does one find hard data on the actual costs, or anticipated usage of these links, much less their financial viability.

Chen puts forward two parallel concepts, 'geo-neo-functionalism' and 'geo-developmentism', as theoretical constructs that rationalise the BRI's diverse range. The novelty of the terms notwithstanding, Chen's purpose becomes evident when, without supporting evidence, he rejects the idea of a Sino-centric global trade and investment network. What is being established is 'decentralized multipolarity...a network of relationships and connectivity ... (leading) to a process of redistribution of global wealth' (p. 95). But what about the fact that through the rail, power and other projects, the client states are being locked into enduring dependence, centred on technology, servicing and spare-part compulsions?

Consider the financing, the Asia Development Bank can annually fund only about US\$20 billion worth of new projects in the Asia Pacific region. New financial structures such as the Beijing-based international bank Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

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(AIIB), and the BRICS-funded New Development Bank (NDB) and the planned Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Bank also have limited lending capacity, so that China is the principal financial provider for BRI projects. This makes these projects China-centric. No one has given details of how other countries might contribute to these projects, as sometimes suggested.

The book is marred by strange lapses. Sri Lanka's forced sale of the Hambantota port, to repay China, is not mentioned. Looking at Asian responses to BRI, Chen ignores India's serious reservations, even opposition to some projects, not only in relation to the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC), which traverses the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir region in the Himalayas, and the Karakoram Pass, but also India's stated concerns over viability. But Chen digs out a 6 June 2015 report in *The Hindu* to assert that 'India has shown renewed interest' in the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor project, and that this includes road and rail linkages (p.88). That report was a canard, as a subsequent restatement of India's position has shown. The book also fails to take a detailed look at CPEC, despite the fact that this collection of connectivity, power and other infrastructure projects estimated at over US\$60 billion is relatively well-documented through extensive media coverage in Pakistan, even while the terms of China's loans and other assistance have not been made public. That secrecy, typical of all the BRI projects, also does not attract the author's attention. Selective use of data hurts the author's credibility.

The concluding chapter asks a key question: 'Is China a "quiet" provider of global public goods?' This is an excellent question—a point I have made in my writing on BRI (see Rana 2017). If China does see itself in such a frame, then why has it not engaged in any real international consultation on BRI projects? In our globalised world can any single country play such a role wide canvas by itself, even if it provides the bulk of financing? Sadly, the answer is that BRI/OBOR is so far primarily a vehicle for pursuing Chinese interests, with rather little regard for global usage.

We do need a well-researched comprehensive work on BRI, which takes into account official Chinese narratives, and the full range of responses from its partner countries, plus many international commentaries, favourable and critical, that have come in from diverse sources. One cannot furnish real analysis by ignoring criticism. And that is where this book fails, unfortunately.

REFERENCE

Rana. 2017, October. 'BRI and India and Its Impact on India's China Diplomacy'. <https://www.icsin.org/uploads/2017/10/10/1b92c7fe95d5467b951f7e973bc3433.pdf>

Kishan S. Rana

Former Diplomat, Teacher, Author, Emeritus Fellow

Institute of Chinese Studies

Delhi, India

kishanrana@gmail.com