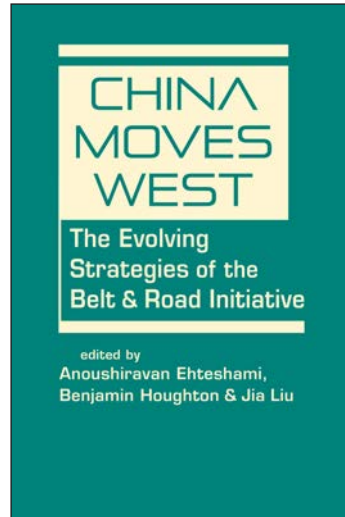


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China Moves West:  
The Evolving  
Strategies of the  
Belt and Road Initiative

edited by  
Anoushiravan Ehteshami,  
Benjamin Houghton,  
and Jia Liu

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# Introduction

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*Benjamin Houghton and  
Anoushiravan Ehteshami*

**In September 2013, fresh and with youthful energy and aspirations,** Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the launch of a Chinese-led megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that would reshape and transform Asia's position within the global economy. It is no coincidence that the new Chinese leader announced the first part of this initiative in Central Asia, in Kazakhstan to be precise, the crossroads of the continent linking South, North, West, and East Asia. Asian connectivity both within the continent and with Africa, Europe, and beyond would be greatly enhanced by the BRI, and China would find itself at the center of it all, marking a great revival of Chinese international clout.

The year 2023 marks the tenth anniversary of the inception of the BRI, an initiative that, while facing some challenges, has gone through several iterations and from strength to strength over the last decade. To mark this occasion and to enrich the scholarly debate on the BRI in Central Asia, West Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—many of which have been neglected or insufficiently addressed in literature on the BRI—this volume provides an overarching appraisal of how this project has progressed, how it is being perceived by states along and adjacent to the BRI, and how Beijing is attempting to navigate challenges in these geopolitically sensitive regions.

The unfolding progress of the Belt and Road Initiative has become one of the most hotly debated topics of international relations in the twenty-first century and a core concern of those monitoring China's rise. The lenses through which one can examine the BRI in these regions are many. All of them are highly penetrated regions with one or more particularly strong global powers playing a disproportionately central role: Russia in the case of Central Asia, the United States in

West Asia, and a number of major powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These regions are endowed with extensive and coveted natural resources. All are geographically significant; Central Asia and Afghanistan are a crucial passageway to Southern and Eastern Europe and West Asia, while Pakistan and West Asia are a gateway to Africa, Europe, and the Mediterranean. Finally, all these Asian regions have found themselves at the center of international relations debates, especially regarding interstate and internal security, the role of great powers in Global South dynamics, and economic development.

*China Moves West* is unique from many perspectives. First and foremost, the book takes a highly China-centric approach to the issue, viewing BRI engagement with these regions as part of its “look west” strategy. With each year that has passed China has put more and more effort into expanding and deepening its engagement in these regions; the BRI has become the umbrella under which the bulk of this engagement sits. With Western audiences keen to understand the success of China’s strategies in these geopolitically sensitive regions, *China Moves West* is well placed to provide an appraisal of Beijing’s strategy for the benefit of academics, policymakers, journalists, the business community, and those with a general interest in Eurasian and Chinese matters. In keeping with this aim, the volume addresses several crucial issues, including how China’s BRI diplomacy has affected its standing in these regions; what Chinese engagement means for Sino-US and Sino-Indian competition; how the invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s footprint in these regions could impact the BRI’s success; how Beijing is navigating conflict zones (such as Syria and Afghanistan) and sanctioned states (such as Iran) in its BRI outreach; and the thorny question of how states along the BRI are navigating competition between Beijing and Washington. These provide a flavor of the issues that are addressed in *China Moves West*, but the chapters cover an even wider array of intersecting topics. What gives *China Moves West* a particular analytical edge is the inclusion of scholars from across the world. While the project was born in the northeast of the United Kingdom, under the auspices of the al-Sabah Research Programme at Durham University, among the volume’s contributors are scholars based in Europe, the United States, West Asia, and China.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

In Chapter 1, Anoushiravan Ehteshami forwards a framework through which the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s emergence as a strong

power across Eurasia can be understood: the Asianization of Asia. Amid grand systemic shifts of not just power but also capital, Asia is redefining itself. Long gone are the days of European colonialism and imperialism, but their scars remain. Along these lines, Ehteshami traces China's emergence as a formidable economic power in this wider process of Asianization. In so doing, he outlines the many political, economic, security, and social challenges that Beijing will face if the BRI is to act as a convincing avenue through which China's arrival on the global stage can be solidified and built upon. Ehteshami lays out several issues that are explored in detail in later chapters, including the rivalries that it must navigate with the likes of India and the United States, in addition to the challenges posed by the buildup of anti-China alliances (such as AUKUS, an agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the persistence of Russia's war on Ukraine.

Building on the observations made by Ehteshami, in Chapter 2 Hongsong Liu introduces the scholarly debates taking place in China and the West regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. Liu's chapter provides a further important framing, and crucial justification, for the book, namely, that Chinese scholars are more wary in their view of the BRI than many outsiders claim. Far from portraying among Chinese scholars a unified and monolithic view that perfectly aligns with the vision of the Chinese Communist Party, Hongsong Liu paints a picture of a China very much aware of the challenges that lay ahead. In so doing, Liu identifies two important themes. First, the issues that Western scholars have identified with the BRI are not unbeknown to those in China. Second, Liu clearly justifies the need for the Chinese government to consider the issues forwarded in volumes such as this if it wishes for the BRI to realize its many goals.

Now moving into the first of the three regions examined in this volume, Giulia Sciorati and Kristiina Silvan explore the contentious issue of Sino-Russian engagement in Central Asia in Chapter 3. The emergence of the behemoth of China in a region where Russia has firmly cemented its role as the foremost power is far from insignificant. Taking a different course from other research on Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia, which usually adopts a system-level approach, Sciorati and Silvan use the unit-level approach of foreign policy analysis to analyze this complicated issue. By taking this China- and Russia-centric approach, Sciorati and Silvan identify that whereas Moscow is keen to curtail China's regional growth, Beijing is not actively seeking to contain Russian influence in Central Asia. Rather, in general the two states cooperate in Central Asia due to a shared ideational outlook toward the

region. With that said, both states are actively attempting to build influence in the region, especially in Kazakhstan.

In keeping with this emphasis on influence-building in Central Asia, in Chapter 4 Julie Yu-Wen Chen delves into the many dynamics of Chinese hard and soft power in the region, and in particular how Beijing is perceived by locals. After acknowledging that Beijing's hard power in the region is growing, not least of all through the emergence of greater military infrastructure in Tajikistan, Yu-Wen Chen asserts that the primary basis of Chinese influence in Central Asia is through soft power. Despite these efforts, the precarious coexistence of Sinophilia and Sino-phobia in the region means that Beijing's approaches toward the region must be carefully balanced if it is to ensure that anti-China sentiments do not bubble over.

In Chapter 5, Mark N. Katz asks the reader to consider the ways in which Russia's conflict in Ukraine could alter Eurasian geopolitics and how this would impact China's influence across this space. Building on the observations made in both of the previous chapters on Central Asia, specifically regarding Russia's role in the region, Katz forwards four possible outcomes for the war in Ukraine and the implications of each for China's interests and standing in Eurasia. If Moscow loses its fight in Ukraine, it will be heavily dependent on China going forward, rendering it somewhat subservient to Beijing. If Russia wins after great effort and damage to its own society, it will similarly remain isolated in the international community; unable to offer much to the world, it will similarly need to turn to China. If Russia collapses entirely due to its invasion of Ukraine, there will be both costs and opportunities for China. Instability in its sizable northern neighbor would not be preferable, but Beijing would have the chance to gain significant influence in the country and similarly in regions, such as Central Asia, where Russian influence is profound. As Katz views it, it is only in the scenario that Russia reforms that China definitely loses out, but even this would entail certain benefits for China. While Moscow in such a scenario would lean further toward the West, it would still be dependent on significant levels of trade with Beijing, given the latter's impressive economic standing. What emerges from Katz's argument overall, therefore, is a Eurasia in which Russian influence is likely to diminish and in which China can make increasing gains.

Russia is not the only major power that China must contend with along the BRI. In Chapter 6 Jeremy Garlick examines the role of Sino-Indian competition in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Taking note of the profound rivalry between New Delhi and Beijing,

Garlick asserts that CPEC cannot act as a viable platform for regional economic integration, if China even wanted it to be, as Beijing has not managed to convince India that its actions are focused on economic development rather than the buildup of security capabilities. Furthermore, due to the prevailing of elite interests in Pakistan, CPEC has been unable to emerge as a strong vehicle for development thus far.

Adding to the discussion about China's activities in South Asia, Jia Liu examines Beijing's goals and approaches in Afghanistan in Chapter 7. In a country mired by constant security challenges, Liu argues that noninterventionism will continue to guide Beijing's approach to Afghanistan. Keen to see stability there, Beijing will focus its policies on economic development. In so doing, it is highly unlikely that China will seek to be the primary external actor in the country; the days of US intervention in Afghanistan are over, and China will not seek to replace Washington. Thus, to address the undoubted threats that could emanate from Afghanistan and affect China domestically or its BRI projects elsewhere in the region, Beijing will focus on helping Afghanistan to develop economically in the hope that stability prevails.

Moving to the final of the three regions covered in this volume, in Chapter 8 Benjamin Houghton opens the discussion about West Asia with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, perhaps the most influential, rich, and powerful countries in the region. As an area marked by heavy US involvement, Houghton questions whether the profound economic inroads made by Beijing in the region, where it has emerged as the primary trading partner of many GCC states, will entail an era of Chinese regional predominance in other spheres. Houghton argues that, even if Chinese leaders wanted to, China is currently unable to displace Washington as the foremost extraregional power in the security sphere. Its inability to project sufficient military power to protect energy infrastructure and its unwillingness to stick its head above the parapet on security matters—not least of all due to its concerted neutrality strategy between GCC states and their main rival, Iran—make it unlikely that Beijing can convert its economic power in the region into the foundation for regional security predominance. Add to this the fact that Washington would be unlikely to allow this to happen and it becomes clear that China's role in the region will not displace that of the United States in the security sphere any time soon.

In another contentious security arena in West Asia and more specifically the locale of a protracted civil war, Kasia A. Houghton examines China's involvement in the Syrian conflict in Chapter 9, delving into whether the newly announced inclusion of Syria in the



BRI will produce benefits for Syria and a solid return on investments for Beijing. In analyzing this issue, Houghton unearths the serious challenges that Beijing will face in navigating the already overcrowded Syrian arena, where Russia and Iran compete for lucrative contracts in Syria's postconflict reconstruction phase. Overall, the chapter provides a stark example of China's navigation of conflicts in the twenty-first-century multipolar order and the implications this may have on the Belt and Road Initiative.

While Iran is not a conflict zone, it is a country that has been set back by successive rounds of sanctions, economic mismanagement on a large scale, and deep tensions with the United States and neighboring countries, rendering it an incredibly challenging environment to navigate for Chinese leaders. Jacopo Scita argues in Chapter 10 that for the BRI to be successful in Iran, Beijing and Tehran must overcome several obstacles. First, the issue of sanctions must be managed if Chinese businesses are to feel free to pursue investments in Iran. Second, if Iran is to fully trust China as a partner, China will have to ensure that it does not deprioritize its relationship with Iran in favor of the GCC states and the United States on sensitive issues. Finally, Beijing must improve Iran's institutional and financial integration into the BRI to mitigate the opacity that persistently surrounds the Sino-Iranian partnership.

At the heart of the Eurasian crossroads, a member of NATO, and a West Asian state with significant clout, Türkiye is a crucial player to consider when examining the evolving dynamics of the Belt and Road Initiative. Derya Göçer and Ceren Ergenç argue in Chapter 11 that China is struggling to make strong inroads in Türkiye due to numerous issues. First, Türkiye is not perceived as a safe destination for investment. While the Chinese Communist Party may try to direct Chinese companies toward Türkiye, they are made uncomfortable by the levels of corruption and nepotism there. The issue is not unidirectional, though. Overcentralization is a profound problem in Türkiye. Further to this, the government in Ankara has not established a wide-ranging China policy, meaning that key Turkish industries have been hamstrung when attempting to take part in the BRI. As such, while there are great hopes for the progress of the BRI in Türkiye, Göçer and Ergenç assert that significant changes need to take place if the BRI is to grow into a successful endeavor in the country.

The final case study examined in this volume is Israel. Acknowledging the substantial obstacles faced by Beijing in its engagement with Israel due to the hawkish eye that Washington has on the latter's cooperation with China, Yitzhak Shichor argues in Chapter 12 that the

United States is making a severe strategic miscalculation by focusing its global efforts on countering Beijing. The real target, Shichor asserts, should be Russia. Providing a much needed Israeli perspective on the issue, Shichor proclaims that Washington should give Israel more latitude in its relationship with China and trust Israel to pursue its own national interest in a way that does not damage the United States.

In Chapter 13, Hongda Fan reflects on the many lessons asserted in *China Moves West*. Amid the solidification of the Asianization of Asia, Fan reminds the readers of the great challenges facing China, the states along the BRI, and Beijing's competitors. The BRI has great potential, but if Beijing and its rivals fall into the trap of increased hostility, the future of Eurasian politics could be mired by unnecessary conflict and tension. A future of mutual benefit and economic prosperity is possible but will take work from all sides to achieve.