

Does the Belt and Road Initiative Cause Conflicts?

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's premier foreign policy initiative. As a result, every aspect of the initiative should be investigated for the potential consequences it may have. Due to our undeveloped understanding of the BRI's likelihood of causing conflict, this work analyzes 9 countries across Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe to determine how the BRI may cause conflict. Likely due to concerns being addressed before they escalate, this research does not find evidence of conflict amongst its cases.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative, as proposed in 2013, is a foreign policy initiative that China officially claims will usher in a new era of global trade and prosperity. This will be done through Chinese investment and increased trade. The initiative plans to reduce global inequality, open new markets for Chinese businesses, and advance China's position as a global leader; ushering in a more harmonious future for participant nations (Anwar, 2019). The extent to which China has achieved, or even can achieve, these goals has been hotly debated for at least the past decade, and will continue to be a topic of debate well into the future.

This debate over China's success is where my piece aims to build upon our current understanding of the BRI's many consequences. With the attacks on Chinese officials in Pakistan (Hendrix, 2022) and riots in Sri Lanka (Aneez, 2017) in recent memory, this work will investigate other BRI host countries to determine if China's goal of producing a harmonious future may be going in the wrong direction. Perhaps instead of bringing nations together in harmony, the BRI is cultivating an environment prone to civil unrest, manifested through intrastate conflict.

Literature Review

Much of the initial debate over China's ambitions, and the BRI's realistic outcomes, has focused on the economic aspects of the project. This is understandable as metrics of economic success or failure are both less abstract, and more available, than measures of China's influence or the feelings of recipient populations. Further, the project is undeniably focused on economic pursuits. This economic research is useful for looking at other aspects of the BRI's success as articles about economic measures provide insight into the attitudes and environments within BRI host nations. Unfortunately this economically focused approach has resulted in the literature on the BRI's impact on community building and harmony to be underdeveloped. Despite this, many of the lessons learned through research on the economic impacts of the initiative can provide guidance on how an analysis of the initiative's impact on harmony should proceed.

Within the economic debate much of the scholarship has surrounded concerns that the BRI is an attempt at Debt Trap diplomacy (Gang & Kunrong, 2020). The BRI largely focuses on assisting developing countries. China has made efforts to select countries which they deem as stable (Dai, 2022). However, there is still risk associated with pouring resources into countries that cannot necessarily handle the debt. As stated in a 2019 article, the impact of a country defaulting on its debt, or canceling infrastructure projects, has the potential to destabilize the economy of a nation, which is disastrous not just for a single country, but its neighbors and allies as well (Siu, 2019). There was also the case in Sri Lanka where the Hambantota port was ceded to China when the country's debts grew too large (Abi-Habib, 2018). This looming threat, and China seemingly acting under this premise is certainly cause for concern.

However, since its rise in popularity, the idea of the BRI simply being a modern day debt trap has not stood up to academic scrutiny (Gang & Kunrong, 2020). China has made moves to help lessen the debt of host countries, many of which will be covered in the later parts of this

piece (Carmody & Wainwright , 2022). The BRI 2.0 idea has also been promoted as a shift away from projects with the potential to cause Debt Trap-esque outcomes (Carmody et al., 2022).

Signaling that the debt-trap is likely not China's end game.

Research into the linking of financial systems as part of the BRI has also found that the conjoining of economies between China and participating countries has initially been successful in providing two main benefits. First, is the lowering of barriers to investment in partnering countries. Second, is that observed countries have become more resistant to financial shocks by benefiting from the resilience of the Chinese financial market (Yu et al., 2021). However this same success, for both the people and government of participating nations, cannot be stated for the creation of special economic zones and infrastructure projects. A researcher from the University of Cambridge studying the attitudes of those living near BRI development identified a common scenario in which the creation of special economic zones and the construction of infrastructure has been, and continues to be, carried out against the wishes of local populations (Apostolopoulou, 2020). This has resulted in a generally unfavorable view of BRI development by the host population (Apostolopoulou, 2020).

The second largest area of research has been into the growth of China's influence. This literature is not as robust as is economics, but is still substantive, and useful for our purposes. Through the BRI China has been encroaching into the spheres of influence of other international groups. In Southeast Asia China has been pushing against The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Punyaratabandhu, & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018) . And in Europe observers have theorized that actions within Greece are aimed at penetrating The European Union (EU), and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Stroikos, 2022).

The lessons from economic-focused literature are twofold. First, China has shown a willingness to be adaptive if it will ensure the continuation of the BRI and the maintenance of China's image as a friend/ leader of the developing world. Second, is that the opinions of local peoples can become secondary in BRI developments. The lesson from influence research is then that China is willing to push against existing power structures in order to advance its goals. This research then proceeds with the understanding that while China is willing to be adaptive, the initiative will push against existing power structures and populations to fulfill its goals. And as we have seen in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, sometimes the people push back.

This study will now build upon prior research by branching out into the impacts of the BRI on developing global harmony. To do this I will proceed in an exploratory fashion to determine whether the BRI is a cause of conflict; and if it is found to be a cause, why?

Methodology

This research plans to investigate a variety of host nations in the BRI. Within each nation I will identify whether a conflict has occurred which has the BRI as a cause. I will also identify reasons why a conflict has or has not occurred.

This is done to build upon our understanding of the consequences of the BRI and address the concerns that the BRI may cause conflict. As addressed previously, much scholarship has gone into the determination of the potential pitfalls of an initiative of this scope and scale. As a result, I believe that these projects must be given objective analysis to determine what the consequences of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) actions truly are, and whether these potential pitfalls could be mitigated through a different approach to these projects.

In addressing a topic as broad as the BRI's impact on developing harmony, some narrowing of scope is necessary. As such this work has chosen to focus on conflicts for two

reasons. The first is the ease of access to this information. Once a conflict occurs it becomes broadcast through press and other research making it easy to identify. This is less true of other metrics which reveal potential dissonance such as military spending which can be harder to track due to governments' restriction of information. The second is the ability to be traced back to the BRI. When a conflict targets BRI assets or personnel it is a clearer response to BRI actions than my previous example of military spending would be due to the plethora of factors which go into a nation's budgeting.

For the purposes of this research, conflicts worth looking into are intrastate conflicts, attacks on BRI personnel or assets, and protests which inflict physical damage on BRI personnel or assets. Interstate conflicts were quickly ruled out from investigation due to such a conflict between a host nation and the PRC not being observed since before the BRI was introduced. Intrastate conflicts have further been chosen due to their ability to bring to light the differences between what the government of a host country values versus what the people of a host country value. Attacks on BRI assets and personnel are included as they reflect a clear rejection of the BRI. Protests are included as they are a common way, having already been observed in Sri Lanka, in which the population of a host country can directly send a message to the PRC and its State Owned Enterprises (SOE). The SOEs are Chinese firms which are closely tied to the state. These firms operate under the supervision of the CCP to carry out actions which advance the party's goals. Thus, tracking pushback to SOE's is important due to the firms serving as a proxy for direct Chinese action in project construction. Protests also serve as a good metric due to their nature of specifying motivators and targets.

In order to get an understanding of how the BRI is playing out across a wide range of host nations, this analysis will look at nine total countries across three different regions. The three regions for this research are Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Southeast Asia was chosen as it is China's neighborhood and there has been a long history of China interfering within the internal politics of this region. The countries within this region selected are Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia. These countries were chosen both because they all have a wide variety of BRI projects proposed within them and have all had recent political turmoil which may increase their likelihood of conflict.

Africa was chosen due to Africa being an area where China has long tried to cultivate ties. The Horn of Africa also has a recent history of conflict in areas where China has planned to construct BRI infrastructure. For this research Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti have been chosen as cases. The reasoning for these cases to be selected is that they are all on the main BRI route, and have seen much of their flagship projects already completed. This allows for an analysis of how populations react to BRI infrastructure that is in use.

Europe was chosen because it provides an idea of how China intends to interact with more western nations, and is also the terminus of the main BRI routes. For this research Greece, Hungary, and Serbia were chosen as cases. These cases were chosen as they all house preconstructed infrastructure which is either being acquired or revamped as part of the BRI. Allowing for this research to see how populations react to their preexisting infrastructure being incorporated into the BRI as opposed to the construction of new infrastructure.

While it is certainly useful to conduct analysis of projects in Central Asia, Latin America, and South America, the time constraints of this project have resulted in their ultimate dismissal from this research.

This research will be conducted using a literary analysis of primary and secondary sources. As such this work contains information gathered from studies, news articles, and published agreements between organizations working on these projects. As a result this work is able to get an understanding of the sentiments from both outside observers and those working directly with projects. Further, literary analysis is the research method of choice for this research as it allows for an in depth analysis of the goals of entities working on projects without the need to travel to the wide array of countries this research aims to look into. Traveling to countries and conducting interviews with the general population would give a more in-depth look at the sentiments of the population. However, due to the resources required to visit all nine countries, this is incompatible with the constraints of this research. If this research was pared down to fewer countries in order to make interviews more feasible, it would lose the sample size and variety which lends generalizability to the conclusions and recommendations that could be made.

Cases

Southeast Asia

Myanmar

Arguably Myanmar is the BRI host country that China has spent the longest time investing in and trying to stabilize, albeit to a degree that is favorable to China's interests (Kobayashi & King, 2022). Myanmar is home to a wide range of projects, with the major projects in the country centered around the China- Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). The CMEC consists of the Kyaukphyu deep sea port and the Muse-Mandalay Railway project as well as pipelines and special economic zones (Mark et al., 2020). Construction on these projects has been slow due to the land acquisitions and logistical challenges of the work (Mark et al., 2020).

This slow progress has been further compounded by a shifting government which has led to several renegotiations of projects as time has gone on (Soong & Aung, 2021).

Another factor leading to the stalling of BRI projects in Myanmar has been Myanmar's policy of hedging. Hedging, a very common strategy amongst less prosperous countries participating in the BRI, has been enacted throughout the two-thousands, but was at its peak during the 2010s (Peng, 2021). Much of the reasoning for this strategy in Myanmar stems from the fear that being a smaller country they will be overtaken by the much more powerful China. As such Myanmar has tried to hold onto their position as a country which receives investment and assistance from China, but still tries to court investment from other powers. This strategy has, however, fallen apart in recent years as the 2017 genocide and 2021 coup have alienated much of the west (Kobayashi & King, 2022).

On top of the shifting project agreements, China faces a population which has been made to feel that they are an afterthought throughout all of this. A sentiment which is not unjustified as projects disproportionately benefit those in power while providing less benefits for those on the outskirts (Mark et al., 2020). Meanwhile China's presence has heightened Myanmar's tensions with northern rebel groups as Chinese actors have brought in private military organizations to protect their investments in Myanmar (Mark et al., 2020).

Given the history and tensions within Myanmar, an initial assumption would be that this area would be a conflict-prone host nation. In spite of this, conflicts that can be tied directly to the BRI are fairly rare. So far protests towards Chinese-run garment factories set up as part of the special economic zone in Yangon has been the only push back which could be classified as a conflict within the scope of this research (Peng, 2021).

The protests, which left 38 dead, were a response to China's willingness to continue to work with Myanmar through the BRI despite the government's mistreatment of its people (McNeil & Ting, 2021). It appears that the population has identified the major failure of China's foreign policy to be a willingness to stand by those in power in host countries despite controversial actions by those in power. Despite this being a clear rejection of China, there is not sufficient evidence for me to allege that this is a response to the BRI specifically and not a response to Chinese foreign policy on the whole.

There are also examples here of China possessing a willingness to compromise and renegotiate. As noted in the work by Kirchherr, Charles, and Walton, Chinese firms have been repeatedly willing to modify their projects to abide by Myanmar's changing safety standards (Kirchherr et al., 2017). China has also been willing to modify the scope of the BRI in Myanmar such as in 2018 when, due to concerns within Myanmar about rising debt, plans for the development of Kyaukpyu were scaled back (Mobley, 2019). These compromises signal that China and their SOE's are responsive to popular demands within host countries. It is possible that this negotiation and compromise present a channel through which project pushback is able to be addressed before conflict occurs.

Thailand

On the surface, Thailand seems like a country in which the stress placed on pre-existing tensions, brought on by the BRI, would lead to pushback manifested as conflict. Home to prolonged conflicts with separatists in the south (Hinz, 2022) and governed by a general placed in power through a recent militaristic coup, against whom protests have been common (Reuters, 2020), Thailand is a state that is heavily influential, yet is still politically volatile. The country

has however been receptive to the BRI and has recognized the benefits participating in the BRI can have (Punyaratabandhu, & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018).

For most of the history of the BRI in Thailand, the focus has been on two main projects. First is the Kra Canal, a plan to construct a canal through Thailand that would bypass the Strait of Malacca, one of China's key desires (Tseng & Pilcher, 2022). China has long had interest in bypassing the strait as China views it as a weakness in its shipping and hydrocarbon stability. Due to the natural choke point it creates, the strait presents a sizable economic and strategic risk that China would like to minimize. In addition to the Kra Canal are the Bangkok-based high speed rail lines (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018). These lines present the opportunity for Thailand to reduce their dependence on maritime trade by joining onto rail infrastructure heading north into China's Yunnan province, and the Chinese network as a whole. This would allow for faster trade with Chinese markets as well as its overland neighbors (Lampton et al., 2020). Both projects have been subject to slow starts and setbacks with it now being evident that the Kra Canal has little chance of leaving the planning phase anytime in the near future (Tseng & Pilcher, 2022).

Conflict, as defined by this research, in conjunction with the BRI in Thailand has been largely absent. Despite the projects being backed and to an extent championed by a controversial government, as well as both of the proposed major projects set to occur near areas contested by the separatist movement (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2021). There has not been any sizable action taken in defiance of BRI projects.

A likely reason that nothing has occurred, even with the country being ripe for conflict, is that the BRI aligns with many of the goals of Thailand, namely larger economic growth and development (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2021). Additionally, negotiations

surrounding the projects have largely been productive. The Thai government has been able to modify project agreements repeatedly and even place them on pause without too much push back from the PRC or relevant SOEs (Lampton et al., 2020).

Malaysia

Malaysia is home to a wide variety of projects, by some measures having the widest scope of all Southeast Asian host nations (Bush, 2022). The country is home to proposed rail developments, ports, and special economic zones with the major project being the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) (Chin, 2021).

Despite projects being temporarily paused under Mahathir Mohamad (Kuik, 2021), the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003 and again from 2018 to 2020, the overall perception towards BRI projects from the government appears favorable. Those in power in Malaysia recognize the benefits BRI projects can bring the nation, with a Malaysian official even stating that the biggest question surrounding BRI projects is “when?” (Lampton et al., 2020).

Despite a favorable view from those in power, Malaysia does have characteristics that indicate an increased likelihood of conflict: namely, the recent political troubles that the country faced post-Covid, in which the nation's parliament struggled to form an enduring government from 2020-late 2022 when Anwar Ibrahim was able to form a coalition government (Mayberry, 2022). The ethnic divide between Chinese and Islamic populations within the country. As well as the Country’s Islamic population’s pushback to BRI projects due to their anger towards the treatment of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, China (Chin, 2021).

Similar to Thailand, in contrast to an environment which possesses heightened social tension and political volatility, nothing that could be accurately described as a conflict has

materialized. As the new parliament takes hold, conflict in the near future seems unlikely as Anwar Ibrahim has placed better relations with China as one of his key goals (Lovett, 2022).

Both parties have also been moderately flexible. Malaysia has reinstated the previously paused ECRL and been willing to take on more projects due to China agreeing to a shortened route and decreased construction costs (Chin, 2021). This allowed Mathir, in power at the time, to market a win-win result to the Malaysian people (Chin, 2021). While Mathir's time in office has ended, China has shown a desire to address problems and respond to the needs of the host country.

Africa

Kenya

Kenya's motivation to engage in China's BRI has been aided by Kenya's own 2030 plan to improve their economy and infrastructure (Kenya Vision, 2023). In combination with this plan, Kenya has had struggles obtaining non-Chinese financing. As a result the BRI is a very attractive option to the Kenyan officials, especially Uhuru Kenyatta, who as Kenya's president from 2013 through 2022 utilized his position to get BRI projects implemented within the country (Tripathi et al., 2021).

The largest focus of the BRI in Kenya has been a standard gauge rail line (SGR) which is to start at the port in Mombasa and connect to the capital Nairobi, then head west and connect into Uganda (Baau & Janiec, 2021). This project has seen middling success as the demand for the rail line is not to a point which creates profitability. As of the writing of this article, the railroad does not expand much farther than the capital, and competes with an existing highway for traffic (Downs, 2022).

Kenya is thus in a position where the debt brought on by BRI loans is causing concern amongst critics as there is no clear path to repayment. This has led to Chinese banks both forgiving some loans while also being hesitant to lend more money for the continuation of the rail line (Bartlett, 2022).

Kenya is also a country with a precedent for attacks on unpopular infrastructure projects. In 2014 there were protests and an attack by Al-Shabaab, a violent Somali Islamic insurgent group, in response to plans for a greater development of Kenya's oil infrastructure (Jorgic, 2014). The BRI projects in Kenya have been controversial due to previously mentioned economic factors, as well as developments occurring on both tribal and protected lands inside Kenya (Baau & Janiec, 2021). With Al-Shabaab still active in the region it is reasonable to suspect that conflict would have broken out. In spite of this there has not been an event in Kenya which this research would define as BRI driven conflict.

Similar to the lack of conflict in other cases, the cause is likely China and their SOE's flexibility with project agreements. As noted above China instituted loan forgiveness to aid with the struggle of repayment. At the SOE level the Chinese Railway and Bridge Corporation and the China Communications Construction Company have both been responsive to labor strikes. Strikes which have not risen to the level of conflict, and which lack evidence for one to argue arose due to the nature of the BRI as opposed to the general nature of infrastructure construction. The SOEs have also operated within the confines of changing local regulations, likely stemming from the Chinese government's policy of punishing SOE managers who violate local regulations (Carrai, 2021). SOE's also appear incentivized to avoid issues which could turn into legal challenges, exemplified by the time when calls for increased protective equipment arose after worker deaths were swiftly granted (Carrai, 2021). Within Kenya SOE's were also amenable to

outsider perspectives especially when legal challenges arose. A prominent example of this is when the route for the SGR was modified in response to a legal challenge against a route which cut through Nairobi National Park (Carrai, 2021). Again showing that the prevalence of conflict may be low due to disagreements being addressed before they can rise to the level of conflict.

Ethiopia

As the seat of the African Union, and as a nation that has had a similar development path to that of China at the end of the 21st century, Ethiopia has attracted heightened interest from the PRC. The BRI in Ethiopia has mainly focused on the Addis Ababa Djibouti Electrified Railway (ADA) allowing connection to Djibouti and their deep sea port (Carrai, 2021). As a landlocked nation, greater access to the port presents a significant boon for Ethiopia.

Struggling with internal ethnic relations and plagued by corruption, Ethiopia is facing challenges with realizing the maximum benefit the BRI could provide. Tensions within the country came to a head in 2021 when conflicts arose within the Tigray region of the country. Fueled by dissatisfaction with internal politics, the conflict in Tigray was realized when Tigrayan security forces launched a self-reported preemptive strike against an Ethiopian National Defense Force base (Walsh & Latif, 2022). While this conflict does not appear to be motivated by actions carried out under the banner of the BRI, Tigray's history as a prosperous region has made it a center for Chinese-backed investment which was put at risk during this conflict (Freedman & Bekele, 2022).

Despite Ethiopia being gripped in a conflict for much of 2021 and 2022, Chinese projects and individuals managed to avoid involvement. While there are Chinese assets in the Tigray region, reports have not shown that they were targeted during the conflicts.

China's ability to avoid getting involved in Ethiopian conflicts may be related to China's policy of noninterference. "African solutions for African problems" has been a popular slogan of Chinese involvement in both the Horn of Africa and the continent as a whole (The Herald, 2023). Additionally, China has worked to arrange peace summits in the region which may be helping them to present as a more neutral party in African politics despite their favoring of incumbents. Furthermore, China has played a role in the rebuilding of Ethiopia post conflict which one would reason aids in creating the image of a neutral third party amongst groups jockeying for power in Africa (CGTN, 2023).

Chinese firms have also been patient in terms of repayment. Ethiopia has had difficulty with maximizing usage of projects. Exemplified by the light rail line in Addis Ababa, which has struggled to operate due to issues with maintaining electricity to power the railroad (Tarrosy & Voros, 2023). While this problem has persisted, China has not pushed for repayment of their investment into the line. Through negotiations China has further provided loan forgiveness to help lessen the burden on Ethiopia (Tadesse & Sguazzin, 2023). Again signaling that China appears interested in the success of these projects and ensuring that the burdens do not grow too large.

Djibouti

China's third major foothold in Eastern-Africa is Djibouti. The geographically small nation has been able to capture China's interest due to its Red Sea access. The nation is also home to China's only permanent military installation abroad, making it the only case in this research in which China has a formal military presence (Tanchum, 2021). In addition to the base, Djibouti houses the ADA railway, several ports, and a free trade zone. All of the projects in

Djibouti have had the aim of cementing Djibouti's role as a major trade hub on the Red Sea (Carmody & Murphy, 2022).

The potential for conflict is there as the current, and long time, president Ismaïl Omar Guelleh has been criticized for autocratic behavior. As a result there have been protests within the country that have occasionally turned violent, though not directed at BRI assets (Paravicini et al., 2022). China has been willing to work with the current regime. However, relations have stagnated between the two countries as debt to China rises and returns are less than anticipated (Seibt, 2021). Some critics have even likened the situation to that of Sri Lanka, stating that Djibouti may be at risk of forfeiting infrastructure to Chinese control (Seibt, 2021). This potential for civil unrest and weakening relations is further compounded by the large influx of migrants arriving in Djibouti to escape conflicts elsewhere in the Horn of Africa (IOM, 2021).

Notably, then, there has not been a reported conflict within Djibouti targeted at BRI actors or investments.

As with other countries that have struggled with debt, China has been willing to renegotiate deals Djibouti feels are oppressive (Carmody & Murphy, 2022). This strategy by China is likely a contributing factor to preventing pushback. It is worth noting, however, that China is not alone in Djibouti. The US, France, Japan, the UK, Germany, Spain, Saudi Arabia, and Italy all also have bases in the nation, meaning that there is a strong incentive to keep the peace (Tanchum, 2021).

Europe

Greece

Despite cooperation with China for several years Greece only joined the BRI in 2018 (OBOReuropa, 2018). The major BRI infrastructure is the Piraeus Port in Athens. However, this

port was not constructed by Chinese contractors or created through Chinese investment. Instead, this port has slowly been acquired by Chinese investors through the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) (Apostolopoulou, 2020). The acquisition began prior to BRI participation, with the acquisition of a majority share being reached in 2016. The port has been rolled into the BRI now that relations are formal.

The Hellenic Government as well as the CCP have been very outspoken about the positives of this endeavor. The Hellenic Government sees the BRI as an initiative which can further solidify their economy after a history of financial troubles. While the CCP views Greece, and the port specifically, as The Head of The Dragon, a term meant to represent the port's role as the gateway into Europe for goods traveling from China (Apostolopoulou, 2020).

However, this positive view is not shared outside the partnership. The BRI in Greece has attracted international attention from both Greece's EU partners and the United States. Critics have dubbed the BRI in Greece to be a trojan horse through which China will weaken the EU's stance on China (Stroikos, 2022). Meanwhile the US has signaled, through state-to-state and NATO channels, that it wants Greece to continue to side with the US on China policy (Stroikos, 2022).

The acquisition of the port has also not been popular with the Greek population as a whole as this move can be seen as China taking the port away from Greece (Koutantou, 2016). Further, on COSCO controlled sections of the port anti-union moves, such as shifting contracts and uncertain early retirement policies, have been causes of public concern (Apostolopoulou, 2020). Citizens have mobilized and have protested China's hold on the port (Koutantou, 2016). Despite the protests, which remained peaceful, and suspicion from abroad, Greece has avoided conflict within the country.

The reasoning for this appears to be slightly different than other cases. Within Greece, China has not had to renegotiate deals, but instead has been making smaller steps towards larger goals, exemplified by the piece by piece acquisition of the port as opposed to a single agreement (Stroikos, 2022). Greece has also not had to rely on China, unlike other countries in this analysis, for loans and financing due allies in the EU and the USA. In recent years Greece has even diminished the amount of favoritism it has shown to Chinese SOEs when securing infrastructure contracts (Stroikos, 2022). This signals that Greece has been able to use the BRI to its advantage, namely receiving a revitalization of its maritime sector during a period when other countries were hesitant to invest, without falling into a subservient position with China (Stroikos, 2022).

Hungary

As China's other major foothold in Europe, Hungary has been very cooperative with China. The major project within Hungary is the Budapest-Belgrade railway project (Brinza, 2020). This project is a revitalization of existing railway, but as a cargo exclusive railway its primary function will likely be moving goods into Europe from China (Brinza, 2020).

The BRI within Hungary has attracted negative attention such as criticism regarding profitability and an EU probe into the railway in 2017 (Suokas, 2017). The probe, a response to beliefs that the project was not going to meet EU standards, could have stopped the project in its tracks. While it did not terminate the project, it did slow the project down and signaled the EU's uneasiness about the relationship between Hungary and China. Critics of the relationship at large and the railway project in particular have further claimed that this endeavor will not be profitable and will be heavily biased towards benefiting China. In response to these claims, the government decided to classify information about the project before construction began in 2021 (Reuters,

2020). Fueling claims that the government has negative information about the project it wishes to keep secret.

While there has not been a conflict, as classified in this analysis, within the country related to the BRI, protests have occurred. Protests directed at the railway as well as plans for a new Fudan University campus have broken out in the last year (Schmitz, 2021). However, the largest type of protest in the country has been in response to disfavor with the current government headed by Prime Minister Viktor Mihály Orbán. Orbán has been a staunch supporter of the relationship with China, and anti BRI sentiments have been present at protests against him (Schmitz, 2021). Due to this it is possible that this country does see a BRI-driven conflict in the future even if they have avoided one so far.

To date, the relationship has been flexible regarding the terms of the rail line agreement. The project will be constructed by a domestic firm, as opposed to many instances in which China has necessitated the use of one of their SOE's (Than & Komuves, 2020). This likely stems in part from Hungary having other options in terms of financing. Further, China needs this rail line in order to maximize the benefits from their port in Greece; meaning they have a strong incentive to make this deal work.

Serbia

Home to the other end of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project, and a line south to connect rail infrastructure from the Piraeus Port to the rest of Europe, Serbia is an important link nation (Brinza, 2020). Because of this Serbia is an important keystone in China's European ambitions. This view is mutually held by Serbia which has declared China as one of its four pillars of foreign policy (Ciborek, 2021). Culminating in a free trade agreement cementing them as trading partners (Vladisavljev, 2022).

Serbia has recently been drifting east in its political ties. Being denied EU membership and facing scrutiny from NATO, Serbia has had little choice in allies. This has led to the nation voting with China in the UN, agreeing to support the One China Policy, and importing Chinese weapon systems (Knezevic, 2023). Further, China has backed Serbia in rejecting Kosovo's claim of independence, but this has seemingly not caused a rejection of the BRI by the Kosovo movement (Bajrami & Semini, 2023).

Despite Serbia being a hotbed for conflict due to the situation in Kosovo, Serbia has not been host to conflict caused by the BRI. Instead, there have been resumed negotiations on peace in Kosovo although it is unlikely that this is connected to the BRI (Bytyci & Cawthorne, 2023).

Flexibility in this relationship has been similar to that in Hungary. With the three working together to make this project a success, there has not been an apparent forcing of one nation's will upon the others (Reuters, 2020). Largely stemming from China's need to make this project work to achieve its larger economic ambition of increased trade with the heart of Europe.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research does not find evidence sufficient to claim that the BRI causes conflicts. Out of our nine cases only one case had an example of conflict which could be tied to the BRI. Further, this case cannot be identified as a conflict motivated by the BRI specifically. Instead, it is arguably a response to China's policy of working with whoever is in power not whoever "should" be in power.

Due to this lack of conflict caused by the BRI, a recommendation of conflict mitigating strategies is not in order. Instead, China has placed the success of these projects above a desire to maximally exploit its position of power. This could be due to the deep ties that the BRI has to China's reputation, or the country having future market access as the primary goal.

This research also found evidence of trends which could be motivators of conflict in the future but have not caused conflict as of the writing in this piece. First, was the abundance of countries that have struggled with debt. Second, is the prevalence of unfavorable sentiments which have not risen to the level of conflict. Third, is the emphasis this type of development places on a mismatch between the goals of the host government and that of the people. All of which are trends that are concerning, and do warrant increased monitoring in the future.

There are many good avenues for research to proceed in the identification of the BRI's impact on a harmonious future. First would be to expand the search for conflicts to the other one hundred plus member countries of the BRI. It would also be beneficial for researchers to analyze other metrics of potential dissonance such as increased military spending and development. Further, as we have seen with the establishment of the military base in Djibouti, it would be worth researching if China itself may decrease the likelihood of a harmonious future through its own security ambitions.

Finally, a general avenue for BRI research would be to identify whether the trends found in this research and other BRI consequence focused work are unique to the BRI or are trends associated with any large-scale foreign infrastructure investment. This avenue will be particularly pertinent with the emergence of the G7's BRI counter initiative, the Build Back Better World.

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