

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) became known to the world in an announcement by President Xi Jinping in 2013. It is an attempt to revive the Silk Road by which territories from China to the far west were connected in ancient history with the addition of key naval routes called the “Maritime Silk Road.” BRI proposes to cover a vast area across the three continents, namely, Asia, Europe and Africa, with the intent of boosting transnational markets and growing the economy in the participating nations (PWC’s Growth Markets Centre 2016, 2). To accomplish this goal, China has invested a huge amount of time and budget in combination with multi/bilateral negotiations to gain support from its prospective partners. According to Gode-ment (2015, 1), approximately \$300 billion was issued by the Chinese government to subsidize the construction of necessary infrastructures where needed.

On the surface, BRI seems like a new offer to the world to enjoy the China-led economy. But this appearance does not reflect the overall nature of BRI, especially when the geo-political context in the past and present is taken into account.

Firstly, the project itself was promoted in the face of the US pivot to Asia which carried two layers of messages. The first one concerned the intention of improving foreign relations with Asian countries but the second was a demand to enhance political influence in the Asia Pacific region against China; as Mislán (2017, 18) asserted, the increase of Chinese competency was one of the factors motivating the Obama administration to lay out a new strategy in the Asia-Pacific area.

Promotion of the project was also executed after Western societies suffered the economic downturn which interrupted the world economy and saw a tendency to spark conflict over resources. Mises (2004, 15) summarized in his article, “The economic causes of war,” that the great wars in the modern age have always been related to the economic mentality.

Conditions such as these two are signs of instability, while BRI itself implies some political significance that involves the prevention of any impact. This article is written to show how BRI plays a great a role as networking transnational businesses. To do so, a prelude to BRI is provided through a review of globalization in the past, starting from

the peak of the free economy, followed by the late economic depression and discussion of some international disputes as from the end of the 2000s. Then, the article offers an analytical synthesis of BRI with reference to these problems. It will cast some light upon the significance of BRI whose dynamism has been deliberately exerted.

The history of the global system in transition

To understand BRI, the picture of the global system in the past must be brought to the fore. The free market economy, globalization, plus the conclusion of the global system are the themes to zero in on.

The end of the Cold War and the boom of the free market economy

After World War II, the world fell into conflict between two different politico-economic ideologies. One was “communism” led by the Soviet Union. The other was “democracy” adopted by the US and her European allies. The economic patterns of the two are dissimilar in basic principles. The communist philosophy was devised upon the premise that a majority of people had undergone economic suppression manipulated by the elite class. Those people were either industrial workers or farmers whose incomes could never compare to the minor rich. Communism hence converted the situation in favor of the passive class by centralizing the means of production and allowing workers to share the rewards on an equal basis (Independent Group of Communists 1999, 7). In contrast, the democratic economy adhered to freedom of earnings plus proportionate gains. It embraced three fundamental attributes consisting of competition amongst businesses, labor for business operations, and budgets to be invested in businesses (Schweickart 2015, 2). Democracy has provided such an economic route for centuries called the “liberal economy” or the “free market economy.” In whatever way, the incompatibility of communism and democracy resulted in the competition to infuse the world with each theoretical principle.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in the early 1990s, democracy and the free market economy spread throughout the world. A new controlling system was established alongside to support this type of globalization. It was a system known as trilateralism, a formula that empowered North America, Europe, and Japan to be the economic center (Nye,

Biedenkopf, and Shiina 1991, xi). Many communist countries did not hesitate to transform themselves to suit the new context. They allowed parliamentary elections and welcomed the free market economy to earn their place in the democratic camp. As for communism, it was thought to be the origin of weak, uncompetitive economies, giving rise to a new era of global networking which extended economic freedom to the degree that deregulation became the heart of all development.

Deregulation refers to the withdrawal of the state's role in overseeing the domestic economy (Schipper and Rietveld n.d., 1). When the state steps aside, there is no legal power to direct pricing, production quantities and the like, urging the private sector to control their businesses in accordance with the market mechanism. Deregulation was a worldwide economic phenomenon in the 1990s, evoking the notion that democracy and deregulation must come together.

China, however, projected herself as an exceptional case. The government of China had come to the decision since 1979 to reform the domestic economy in order to enrich the country's GDP (Datablog 2016). A market-based economy was adopted in place of a centrally-planned system without changing the ruling format even in the midst of the democratic current. China has proved to perform outstandingly through this unusual path and become a case study for modern development. China's GDP in US\$ billions went up massively from 202.46 in 1980 to 11,779.98 in 2016, while gross national savings remained quite steady at around half of the GDP or 48.84% in 1980 compared with 53.47% in 2016 (Datablog 2016).

Outside China, deregulation in many democratic countries turned into the mainstream approach to enrich their interconnected economies in the 1990s. The idea of deregulation was sustained in varied ways. Most popular was to promote deregulation via international bodies such as the WTO (World Trade Organization), the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank. In 1994, the WTO decided to collaborate with the latter two, plus the UN (United Nations), on account of their shared objectives, one of which concerned the expansion of international trade deals (Auboin 2007). The WTO supervised the smooth flow of trade, while the IMF served to allocate appropriate amounts of loans to be used for economic development, as did the World Bank. The three would provide help to any nations on the condition that their governments consented

to deregulating the economic system. Eventually, these international bodies came to symbolize the global network as much as to convince their members to go for the repeal of governmental regulation of the economy.

Failed economy and social instability

What happened in the 1990s filled the world with abundant businesses, a common flow of capital and transnational cooperation. For China, the entire country had done an enormous amount in controlling economic activity within the framework of the market-based approach, regardless of her communist orthodox rules. A high rate of savings, large-scale investments by domestic and foreign capital, plus strong productivity, formed a sound structure for China to have striking economic growth (Morrison 2015, 7). More than 800 million Chinese people stayed above the poverty line, whereas GDP growth was maintained at an average of 10% a year (World Bank 2017). In 2010, China surpassed Japan as the country with the second-largest economy in the world (Teather 2010). This indicated that China would one day surpass the US, both economically and militarily, as she had accomplished more than sufficient to perfect her own market system, including internal arm forces and weaponry industries. The statistics of the IMF also indicated that China had already outweighed the US in terms of purchasing power. These were the results of China's management format, which enabled the central government to maintain some involvement in the economy. The results, however, developed into a sound base for China to implement its bigger role in the world economic system as in the case of BRI in the early 2010s.

In contrast, the approach of deregulation to fuel the free economy started to signal an undesirable outcome in the last half of the 2000s. It all began with the US facing the economic problem known as the sub-prime mortgage crisis which impacted on the trilateral nations, as well as their network.

The sub-prime mortgage crisis stemmed from unsolvable debts in the US, before spreading to other parts of the world. According to a study by Marshall (2009, 3), a sign of the crisis was visible in 2006 as a result of a credit crunch caused by widespread asset mispricing. The US housing market in the late 1990s should be deemed as the actual root because financial institutions did not release loans in coherence

with the real financial capacity of their customers. They approved of over lending at low interest rates merely to accomplish targeted figures. This ended in a rapid escalation of house prices, asset bubbles and credit problems. The crisis became severe in September 2008 when famous US-based financial institutions such as AIG and Lehman Brothers could no longer fund their day-to-day activities (Marshall 2009, 1). Lehman Brothers, for example, went for the legal process of bankruptcy and this was followed by the loss of public trust in financial institutions and banks (European Commission 2009, 9). Then, the banking industry faced up to the difficulty of fund raising which resulted in a limitation of their loans as well forcing them to sell assets at extremely discounted prices in order to prolong their business operations.

European countries encountered a similar impact not long after. Some of them accepted the program for economic restoration only to find that it was unsuccessful. Storm and Naastepad (2015, 1) warned that the program itself worsened the situation. Monetary strictness, radical wage decreases and extensive deregulation of the labor market (to revive cost competitiveness and boost exports for economic growth) were included in the program, so were deleverage and fiscal consolidation. However, none of them could be proved to lower household and public debt. Some countries, such as Greece, were forced to borrow more money to drive the domestic economy. As a consequence, the failed economy in the absence of permanent solutions decreased the influence of Western countries both domestically and internationally. China remained virtually unaffected and became likely to replace the trilateral nations as the new economic center.

In this era, there was a revolutionary movement catching the world's attention. The movement is remembered as the Arab Spring and swept through a number of Islamic countries in the Middle East and Africa, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, the Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. The Arab Spring was reported to have arisen from political pressure that induced massive demonstrations against the ruling governments. In some views, it was influenced by the use of new communication technologies, which allowed people to absorb the image of democracy and liberty until their thirst for change could no longer be controlled. A study by Aissa (2012) suggests that the ruling class did not realize how much their people dreamt of political freedom, a wealthy economy,

and human pride. When the Jasmine Revolution erupted in Tunisia (as an introduction to the Arab Spring), it was too late to prevent the movement in the nearby region.

The most outstanding case of the Arab Spring, nevertheless, seemed to be the clash in Syria, which maintained an armed rebellion against the Syrian government. The fight between the two sides motivated the West to intervene but brought forth a surge of migrants and refugees in Europe in 2015. About 1.5 million immigrants arrived in the EU (European Union) without legal permission and one-third of them were Syrians (Balanche 2016). Reportedly, a large number of asylum seekers submitted their requests to Germany, Sweden, France, the UK, Denmark, and other European countries for a permanent stay. Faith in humanity obliged these European countries not to reject all the applicants in an instant. Germany even announced her decision to admit more than a million refugees in 2015. The Arab Spring was seen, in this manner, as progress for democracy in Arab countries but considered to be the origin of social instability in the West. That is because the influx of asylum seekers in the middle of economic recession could mean some social impacts as discussed next.

Conclusion of the globalized network

In sum, financial deregulation caused economic chaos. Then, the appeal of democracy led people in some Islamic countries to historic demonstrations, followed by the problem of immigration during the instability of the economy in Europe. The EU ran into larger trouble after additional foreign people from the Middle East and Africa impacted the management of social welfare as well as bringing in crime. The UK stepped forward to settle on a nationalist path to avoid an awkward future. The selected option was the public vote called the Brexit referendum on Britain's exit from the EU. Preparation for the referendum proceeded with a claim that the British people required liberation from Brussels to solve the problems in their own way because the EU was not a successful body in directing Europe's economy. Southern Europe, for instance, experienced up to 20% unemployment but the percentage reached only 4.2% in Germany (Friedman 2016). This was indicative of the unequal conditions in the EU community. The matter of social welfare to be arranged for asylum seekers was also a question to think about. When the referendum took

place on 23 June 2016, 51.89% of voters favored the idea of Brexit, whereas 48.11% chose to remain.

In 2016, the US followed in the footsteps of the UK by granting a victory to Donald Trump, a presidential candidate whose campaign slogan was “America first.” On assuming office, President Trump went against the international policies implemented by his predecessor. He signed an order to cease the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) due to be joined by twelve member nation states in terms of trade, no matter that the TPP was yet to be approved by Congress (Baker 2017). The President turned his back on trade expansion on grounds that it always worked to the detriment of the US economic system. The President believed American workers required the state’s protection against low-wage labor from other countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia.

Interestingly, the political trend as seen in Brexit and Trump’s presidency implied that in the future of humanity globalization would be overshadowed by nationalist movements (Fraser 2017, 1). This implication became more apparent in the first half of 2017, when France and some more EU member states became likely to be the next countries to go along the nationalist path. Eyes were on the French presidential election when the nationalist contender, Marine Le Pen, gained the lead in the first round debate with her serious intentions for home policies. She stated that she would prohibit all immigration regardless of the applicants’ legal or illegal status and warned her French audience of the price being paid in exchange for continuing globalization (Bloomberg 2017). Not only in France but many leaders in Europe became alarmed at the prospect of coping with, as suggested by polls, growing nationalism across the Continent.

Apart from the failed economies and asylum, nationalism strengthened in Europe because of people’s disbelief in multinational trade and defense organizations such as the IMF and NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The two were considered to be the controllers of Europe and the producers of the intolerable immigration on the European mainland (Friedman 2016). There was also the ineffectiveness of the EU itself in handling terrorism which, according to PressTV (2017), resulted from NATO’s military mission in the Middle East. Whenever terrorist attacks cropped up in Europe, the EU offered no long-term solutions to calm the public. This struck fear into people who were anxious about vengeance and felt the need to detach them-

selves from the EU whose identity overlapped with that of NATO and could magnetize more attacks.

In addition to all these chronic problems, nationalism came from the idea of regaining rights to do situational analysis and design policies to fit each national context. Those who preferred such an idea held a negative view of the EU on grounds that the EU tended too much to approach problems at the cost of its own stability. Two external factors helped accelerate this idea.

The first one was the impressive economic performance of the eastern countries as Barua et al. (2015, 23) posited.

Once a poorer cousin of the United States and Europe, Asia now boasts some of the world's fastest-growing economies and is a major contributor to global growth.

McKinsey's Shanghai office director, Jonathan Woetzel, commented that Asia was rising to prominence because the Continent could provide immense productivity and opportunities to the world (McKinsey Global Institute 2015). It could be said that the East became the source of the prosperity for restoring the economic strength. In China alone, for example, the mid-2020s would be recorded with 30-40% of consumption spending from generation-2 consumers or people under the age of 25 in 2015 (McKinsey Global Institute 2015). Those consumers were considered to have the wealth and willpower to spend compared to the former generation.

The second factor concerned tension with Russia. The EU accused Russia of propaganda against peace in Europe. The EU Parliament pledged to counteract that propaganda. 304 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of an information war against Russia, while 179 members were against it and 208 members abstained on the vote (RT News 2016). They also made several negative remarks during one heated debate in the parliament.

The shining economy in Asia and conflict with Russia elicited the thought that staying with the EU might not be of help. The EU seemed to take time in negotiating with its Eastern counterparts and did not involve key economic gatherings such as the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), the CJK (China–Japan–South Korea Trilateral) and the AEC (ASEAN Economic Commu-

nity) (Okano-Heijmans 2014). At the same time, the EU presented no safety plans in the matter of Russia aside from raising tension and turning Europe into a battlefield. It can be argued that the decision to assume nationalism was actually a reaction to these stressful conditions as exemplified by many cases. Le Pen, for example, declared a plan to work with Russia during her visit to Moscow in March 2017 (Nikolskaya and Melander 2017). Her action was to show how nationalism would work in the matter of international relations. Le Pen lost the vote against Emmanuel Macron.

To conclude, one should bring to mind that nationalism did not only impact the practice of cooperation in the EU but also threatened the present pattern of the global economy. Because the EU, like the US, had been a driving force for a long time the globe might then return to the state in which a number of nations conducted their politico-economic policies independently. In the worst-case scenario, the globe would be prone to overt competition and transnational conflicts for the acquisition of wealth. According to Nye, Biedenkopf, and Shiina (1991, xii), capitalist globalization functions as a network in the prevention of disastrous confrontations as in both World Wars and the Cold War. Without solid globalization, undesirable conflicts might come about with ease.

The prospect of confrontation

The foregoing discusses globalization in crisis, meaning that the world is at a critical turning point. This section elaborates on confrontation as another matter to be analyzed in conjunction with problematic globalization.

The rise of the new superpowers

The US and EU have occupied the leading position in the global network ever since the 1990s. The world conformed to the tenets of their capitalist democracy until the system started to fall apart in their hands. In the midst of the insoluble financial problem, a new wave of superpowers emerged as an option where middle-minor countries could seek help. They consisted of China, Russia, and some allies. China was the most exceptional in economic terms while military superiority belonged to Russia. Conceptually, they teamed up to

ensure the stability of peace and the economy where necessary but their presence could be seen as an endeavor to destabilize the existing superpowers at the same time. Ben Rhodes, assistant to the former US President Barak Obama, declared that:

Russia poses this immediate threat to the kind of international order and stability. China is a much more powerful country and is much more positioned to be a competitor to the United States in a way that Russia cannot be. (Aljazeera 2016)

Such negative interpretation was based on the observation of some significant actions by the new superpowers. The major one was the establishment of international organizations such as the BRICS and the AIIB.

The announcement of the BRICS in 2015 increased anxiety amongst some capitalist nations. BRICS is a grouping of five countries; Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. They were the main part of the new political wave. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was founded in the same year with headquarters in Beijing, China. The BRICS founded the NDB (New Development Bank) to counter the monopoly of the IMF and World Bank after seeing the way in which the two bodies failed to treat their members with a normative, democratic, and efficient standard (PTI 2015). The AIIB shared the same founding members as the NDB but featured China, India, and Russia as the top three shareholders (PTI 2015). The AIIB could appeal to a number of nations, even the major economic powers, to acquire membership, including France, Germany, South Korea, Turkey, Spain, and the UK.

The SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) was also an organization monitored by the Western superpowers. The organization was founded in 1996 to cover the following member states: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. They agreed to focus on some key issues involving security among the members. They would provide mutual assistance against extremism or separatists who could undermine the regimes of their member nations (Aris 2013, 4-5). The area of cooperation also included macroeconomic projects for the further development of infrastructure (Aris 2013, 6). However, the collective function of the SCO was clearly to tighten the relation-

ship between neighboring countries to prevent intervention from outside the region because this region was the location of the two superpowers that mattered to the Western camp.

Escalating tensions

Aside from the monitoring of the new superpowers, endless conflicts could be seen around the strategic sites. Three of them might trigger a war on the grounds of inappropriate management. The sites included (1) Eastern Europe, (2) the Middle East, and (3) the South China Sea. The last one was so serious that China required a soft power approach, such as the new Silk Road, to cope with it.

The South China Sea dispute began in 2012. It involved China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei. They claimed the right to own areas such as the Paracels, the Spratlys, and so forth. These areas were considered to be a major shipping route as well as sites of rich natural resources and livestock (BBC 2016). The climax came when China constructed an island in the disputed zone.

Beijing's intention to exert greater control over the South China Sea appears undiminished. In 2012, China forcibly seized control of the previously unoccupied Scarborough Reef during a standoff with Philippine maritime vessels, despite agreeing to a mutual withdrawal brokered by Washington. China has seemingly been emboldened by this easy, cost-free conquest: it has since begun construction of artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago that will enable it to extend the range of the Chinese navy, air force, coast guard and fishing fleets in just a few years. (Glaser 2015, 1)

Simultaneously, U.S. military ships and planes appeared in the South China Sea to defend "freedom of navigation." The two sides accused each other of having an agenda to adopt the South China Sea for military purposes.

The conflict in this case reveals the US viewpoint against China. The former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, blamed China for limiting navigation and overflights in the problematic area (Brunnstrom and Menon 2015). He said that China had heightened tension and increased militarization of the other five states through the construction of military facilities on artificial islands (Brunnstrom and Menon

2015). In the opposite direction, China's standpoint has been publicly to oppose that of the US. According to the Chinese media, it was China's right to gain access to the South China Sea for her own interests and any campaign to hamper that right could lead to the declaration of a great war (Phillips 2017). It was all, therefore, an information operation designed to discredit each other as well as to escalate tension

BRI as a route to sustainable peace and security

This section combines the themes in the preceding sections and clarifies what implications BRI has for the world.

Overview of the BRI project

The history of imperialism shows that China was suppressed time after time owing to the negligence of developed politico-economic and military strategies. China at the time adhered to an imaginary greatness inherited from the ancient era in spite of changes in the outside world. No Asia Pacific partners cooperated with China in defying the Western powers. They either submitted to colonization or found no chance to do so. Japan and Thailand (formerly, Siam) were the two kingdoms to survive the West's extension of power. Japan, with the Meiji Restoration, became one of the major empires of that period but Thailand still relied on a diplomatic approach to avoid the risk of being colonized. The European powers and Japan were desirous of obtaining resources and securing territory in China. Those days are remembered as a century of shame, caused by the decline of China's imperial rule in conjunction with the West's invasion and threats from the Japanese army (Beeson 2009, 6).

The likelihood of history repeating itself was a matter to beware of. As discussed, the prospect of confrontation could not be denied in strategic areas – particularly, in the South China Sea. Amid this tension, the depiction of China in the mainstream media was rather negative.

To cope with the situation, China went for the soft power approach as seen in the establishment of AIIB and BRICS instead of enlarging her own military forces alone. The grand connection in the forms of BRI and the Maritime Silk Road was, however, a key part of the approach. It looked more permanent and secure due to the prospect of

creating a fixed politico-economic network with China as the center, whereas AIIB and BRICS were just financial institutions.

Theoretically, BRI has the potential to produce a plethora of markets alongside the targeted routes. The project is planned to go through 65 countries in the three continents. Once successful, it will take in a very large area involving up to 55% of world GNP, 70% of the global population, plus 75% of recognized energy in reserve (Godement 2015, 1). Expected advantages of the project consist of huge lines of transportation, interconnected infrastructure, financial collaboration, people-to-people relations, improved communication, investment and trade enablement (PWC 2016, 2). The remarkable nature of the project is also the stimulation of a trillion-dollar market. \$5 trillion has already been arranged for the transport infrastructure, power, water, etc., and half of this amount will be spent in Southeast Asia alone (PWC 2016, 4).

BRI amid globalization in crisis

The third section of this article, however, points to the return of nationalism to ease the problems that have been piling up during the past period of globalization. Nationalism could mean the end of the interconnected economy. Due to its nature, BRI appears to be one of the elements serving to rearrange this economy as well as preventing the growth of nationalist movements. The function of BRI is, in this way, to preserve globalization in addition to extending the definition of globalism to physical connectivity.

As explained previously, the project is meant to promote a new global linkage to be driven by China. The linkage is maintained with economic interaction amongst the participating countries. At the same time, it encourages those countries to keep their engagement in the grand exchange of goods/capital which fulfills the desire for greater economic activity. It is apparent that the idea of nationalism or holding a radical commitment to the interests of one's own country will never work when BRI is fully operational. This will be so because the world has been accustomed to an interdependent economy, whereby continuation of the economic network will always be people's first option. As reflected in the statistic of past trades, many countries in Asia, Europe, and North America shared up to 88% of WTO trade during 2005-2015, while the export from developing countries increased from 33%

to 42% in the same timeframe (World Trade Organization 2016, 12). These figures indicate the strength of the interdependent economy as a uniting force. When BRI was designed to be a generator of that force, especially, during the crisis, the function of BRI was to be interpreted as defending transnational connections against a belief in nationalism.

The other reason is the heavy promotion of BRI in the mainstream media. It communicates the project's popularity and contribution to globalization repetitively. Representative examples of how BRI has been promoted can be found in forms of news or situational analysis. For instance, an article Promoting Cooperation for the BRI Initiative by Monan (2017) stated that:

The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the past three years, and its inclusion in Resolution No. A/71/9 of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, has advanced the goal to build a community of long-term common development. The next steps require giving priority to important institutional innovations and rule-making, including the BRI multilateral investment framework, and rules and mechanisms that govern global trade. This will not only provide opportunities for promoting China's industrial capacity, cooperation and manufacturing upgrading but will also help drive a new round of prosperity-oriented growth for global trade and new globalization.

This article was published in *China-US Focus*, an information source established by the China-United States Exchange Foundation. The author held a position of Senior Fellow, China International Economic Exchanges Center. Another report by Yan (2018), entitled Ukraine Establishes Center to Promote BRI Trade, Investment, stated that:

The Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UCCI) here on Thursday inaugurated the "BRI Initiative" Trade and Investment Promotion Centre in Ukraine. The center will serve as a bridge between entrepreneurs from China, Ukraine and other BRI countries, helping them to find new business partners.

Xinhua is the largest China's news agency, utilizing a combination of platforms including radio, television and website. Its influence is

comparable to that of Reuters, the BBC and the like.

If all the major information about BRI is brought together, it will be evident that the presentation of BRI is done largely according to this routine: BRI is presented as an economic stimulus to satisfy people from top to bottom; BRI is shown in a manner that can arouse each country to stick with a trading culture other than conflict; BRI is often depicted as bearing a resemblance to the ancient Silk Road to signify the return of business partnerships as in the ancient era; BRI is believed to maintain the goal of one world.

This routine is important in drawing massive attention from the popular sector—a crucial determinant in the project's success—as much as connoting that BRI can rule out or, at least, delay an extreme devotion to politico-economic independence.

In tandem with the global agenda, BRI seems beneficial to China in minimizing the dispute with other nations as much as lessening the image of aggressor. An indication of this happened when the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte paid a visit to Beijing in 2016. Lim (2016) reported that he planned to formulate a commercial alliance with China while putting the dispute in the South China Sea to one side. In the same year, Hanoi held a workshop to upgrade economic relations with China. More than a hundred VIP representatives from ministries, local businesses and academic institutions attended the event (China Daily 2016). The reactions from the two countries underlined the demand for international cooperation and signaled a willingness to negotiate. Nationalism as in the case of Brexit and America First could not recur easily.

BRI and confrontation

Research into the relations between economics and conflict has discovered that international trade can reduce the risk of war between trading partners (Humphreys 2003, 20). The fourth section in this article suggests a possible battle that may derive from the confrontation between existing and new powers, whereas an overview of BRI has shown that the project aims to cover a vast number of nations to build and prolong trading activity. Based on this state of affairs, BRI is no more than an attempt to transfer tensions into international cooperation by the use of commercial forces. Even in cases where that continu-

ation of the globalized economy fails to prompt peace between China and, to be exact, for the US, BRI is still of great benefit because BRI is an effective equalizer of collaborators. It accumulates support from a number of countries along the way from China to the West. European members are the ones to be spotlighted, as Europe has always been a close ally of the US, either in the past or the present.

According to the Congressional Research Service report by Derek E. Mix (2015), the US and Europe have formed a transatlantic partnership to accomplish interdependent security and economy for decades. The two sides had concerns and values in common, whereby their partnership grew strongly until they achieved the largest trade and investment relationship in the world.

It is undeniable that to detach the EU from the US via an economic approach will be advantageous to China. The detachment may reduce any confidence either from some of the EU countries or the US herself in challenging the new camp of powers. London is quite an interesting example. The city was finally embraced in the project of BRI via China-Europe rail freight routes (News Desk 2017). From Yiwu in eastern China, the UK-bound train passes through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and the EU countries, spending sixteen days on the journey in total. This route serves as a golden opportunity for producing a large sum of benefits and tends to symbolize the economic partnership between the UK, and China to lessen the image of conflicting rivals. The other route is Zhengzhou in China to Hamburg in Germany which started in 2008. It transports mainly materials for the automotive and electronics industries and has been successful at earning positive feedback regarding its service (Railway Gazette 2013).

To answer why these European powers accepted the rail connection with China in spite of their US counterpart, the relationship with both the US and China must be understood. According to some of the previous discussion, the globalized economy has not been in good health and has never recovered satisfactorily. Many European countries began to value nationalism over globalism with the idea that it could better protect their remaining profits. The price for having such an idea was the loose relationship between Europe and the US, and even within Europe itself. This provided the opportunity for China to approach the prospective European partners with an irresistible

offer of a long-term economy. When a strong economy became a top priority, siding with China was likely to be the more auspicious way out. The world then witnessed the handshake between the two sides.

In this manner, BRI is like an immaterial shield in the matter of conflict management. More partners will mean less chance for China to be subverted. Success only depends on China's ability to convince the world to believe in the strength of BRI.

The Asia Pacific region has undergone the bitterness of war over and over again. The disunity of Asia Pacific countries has made an enormous contribution to the past disputes. The number of battles during the Cold War, such as the Korean War, is an example. At the time, Thailand and the Philippines joined the United Nations force in a mission to fight against Pyongyang. China sent troops to Pyongyang to resist this mission as well as protect her border. Animosity against each other could not be avoided during the war, creating a gap within the region. Circumstances such as the Korean War emphasize that to formulate a single Asia to prevent warfare is indispensable. For China, even one skirmish near her border can be seriously dangerous, especially when it intensifies to a degree that damages Chinese territory and causes the widespread deterioration. If the Asia Pacific is in safe hands, China is out of harm's way.

The idea of Asian unity can also be demonstrated with the map of BRI. It shows Asian participants being those in the strategic areas, particularly, in the Southeast Asia. Some of them are perceivably frontlines for the US to carry out her military operations. The influence of the US also permeates the upper part of the Asia Pacific via Japan and South Korea but North Korea represents herself as being in the forefront to shake the potential of the US in the nearby area. China only needs to employ economic strategies such as the BRI project to encourage a feeling of unanimity around its southeast neighbors. This reduces the chance for the US gaining an advantage over China in the military aspect. BRI should not, in consequence, be considered as solely an economic mission but also an attempt to preclude drawbacks in the battle, if it happens.

Overall, BRI is devised to be a channel for China to shine in economic terms as well as appealing strategically to nations to be on the same side or, at least, avoid alliance with the opponents during at a time of uncertainty. This critical moment could be defined as reorga-

nization of powers, wherein each side tries its best to obtain the largest number of allies. BRI is China's tool for achieving this. It could be said that the project contains an implicit role in expanding China's political partners beyond a pure economic relationship. Sun Tzu, the author of an ancient Chinese military treatise, *The Art of War*, asserts that the supreme art of war is to overcome the enemy without fighting. BRI is an element to handle the conflict in accordance with Sun Tzu's guidance. In this fashion, BRI represents the intent to sustain security in a gentle way.

Conclusion

The world was under the burden of some insoluble problems. The free market economy in support of globalization struggled to proceed. The nationalist stream started to outshine the prevailing global network as a result of the need to ensure the nation's viability and the accusation that globalization was the origin of the failed economy. These circumstances could occasionally cause fierce competition amongst nations as much as the risk of war. The latter was more apparent when the new superpowers appeared with alternative help. Both the existing and new camp of powers pinned the blame on one another for their provocative action which could plunge the entire world into devastating conflict.

BRI has the implication of being a solution to the problems. It proposes a new arrangement for the global economy together with forming strategic alliances to balance international military cooperation. BRI is, therefore, a product of analyzing the world from a bird's-eye view which enables China to see with intercontinental sophistication. It proposes vast unity from the east side of Asia to the west to ensure a wholeness that is not to be effortlessly interrupted. The project provides opportunities for many countries to enhance their financial status via the exchange of trade/investments, plus massive cross-border transportation. It could be said that BRI is a new formula for globalization, using "connectivity" as a key word, while known globalization depends on a "free economy" driven by the US and her top partners. Only if BRI accomplishes that wholeness will confrontations be reduced. This is reflective of the foreign policy concept "better a friend than an enemy."

One should, however, bear in mind that this conclusion refers mainly to the ideological implications of BRI. The project in reality

could still be questioned if it poses a problem to the selected partners as reported below.

But the core concerns raised about BRI implementation in several South and Southeast Asian countries are over the alleged lack of local companies and worker participation, the risk of unmanageable debts and the rather dominant geostrategic interests of China, rather than the economic viability and shared benefits, in several projects. (Lingga 2018)

The project will be defined, as it implies, when China achieves a well-balanced advantage. So, it is too soon to think about its positive side alone, even though the popular sector prefers flourishing atmospheres to confrontation and the Belt and Road Initiative has been presented as an option. More studies and observations must be conducted to predict as well as gain a thorough understanding.

Additional notes

BRI could be seen as parallel globalization (or new globalization to exist in tandem with the extant one) to guarantee the chance for China to survive in the world order. It is apparent that China cannot excel politically and economically under the rules of globalization which have been sustained by the US, and are in favor of the US. China has also been threatened by the US in many ways, such as via economic warfare and information operations. If that is the case, the implication of BRI is more complex than one might imagine. It requires exhaustive study concerning the unstated interactions between China and the US in the matter of the global network.

On the other hand, BRI can be a channel for China to influence the world in place of the US. The BRI plan is to create connectivity that compels the selected partners to depend on China. Through that, China's offer of investments and loans will be given with a tendency to turning some of her partners into submissive debtors. China's concentration on national saving has ended in high spending power. In the absence of BRI, China may find it difficult to exercise this power over the world (BRI contains an image of smoothing capital flow from China to her partners). This view, nevertheless, necessitates extra observation in order to be fully validated.

To see BRI as a consequence of China's nationalism is another option because BRI serves to enhance national unity and shared feeling. A report, *Chinese Nationalism and Approaches toward East Asian Regional Cooperation* by Zhao (2010, 1), explained that nationalist sentiment in China was determined to rely on three factors, namely, a fine economy and political stability, a prosperous and secure frontier, and competitive performance against the US and Japan. These three are equally the function of BRI as discussed earlier.

Challenges and obstacles of BRI can now be detected among China's partners. This is due to the case of Sri Lanka and Laos which project the two countries struggling with what critics called a "debt trap" from China. Many ASEAN countries, for instance, hesitate to give full cooperation to China in constructing infrastructure or investing in key business areas, while the importance of BRI itself gradually lessens because of some other factors such as criticisms in social media and the offer of remarkable plans from the US and Japan. If China does not make any changes, the completion of BRI will not be likely to occur very soon.

Because of the unfavorable perception of BRI, the 5th anniversary of BRI held on August 27, 2018 ended in the conclusion that more effort should be made to promote mutual trust, win-win cooperation, joint contribution, and shared benefits (Xuequan 2018)

President Xi's speech at the same event also provided a new image of BRI. For example, China does not intend to use BRI to form China's world order or BRI is, in fact, meant to be a model for world development. It is irrefutable that the Presidents' words informed the world of the redefinition of the project on purpose. BRI is no longer, or has never been, a tool for accomplishing politico-economic aims as some have understood it. Instead, BRI should be remembered from now on as (1) a friendly and modern cooperation for global development in the absence of any hidden agenda and (2) a development pathway designed in conformity with the concept of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) proposed by the UN. This shift is a reflection of China's demand to build a constructive perception after a number of countries revealed their anxiety about the threat posed by the project. However, words are just a beginning to fixing the situation. The crucial step is China's actual performance.