The Asia-Pacific Journal | Japan Focus

Volume 21 | Issue 4 | Number 3 | Article ID 5769 | Apr 03, 2023

Global-Local Dynamics in Belt and Road Initiative Projects

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Abstract: *This essay argues that modes of conceptualizing global-local entanglements provide a useful lens for looking at the different ways Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects localize in BRI-host countries. The essay draws on recent work on George Ritzer to examine examples of BRI projects where global norms and practices are locally conceived and controlled, in contrast to other cases where the projects barely reflect local culture. Examples of Serbia and Hungary are provided to illuminate these points.*

Keywords: *Global China; Belt and Road Initiative; George Ritzer; Glocal Something; Serbia; Hungary*

There is a growing body of literature examining the localization of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in BRI-host states (e.g., Bitabarova 2018; Pan et al. 2019; Chen 2020a; Chen 2020b; De L.T. Oliveira et al. 2020; Sidaway et al. 2020; Chen 2022). Even in countries in the Global South where most BRI projects are located, Chinese actors—which are generally assumed to be more powerful with better financial and operational capacity—still need to engage in negotiation with local partners in order to achieve their goals. As such, while Chinese engagement abroad is often reflected in asymmetrical relationships, both sides are interdependent, and interactive negotiation is normal (Womack 2016).

While much research focuses on the intentions and strategies of the Chinese state and large SOEs, perceiving Global China through the lens of the local not only offers new empirical insights but also makes possible theoretical and conceptual breakthroughs in comprehending China's global influence via its cooperative projects around the world. With this background in mind, this essay seeks to deepen our understandings of processes of localisation, and ask whether BRI projects should be understood as expressions of "localization", in which the project is adjusted to the host state's interests, norms, customs, and legal framework; or if they are better described as "glocalization", meaning that in addition to being localised, BRI projects retain features that adhere to global norms and practices.

The conceptual shift to glocalization parallels more recent interest in a so-called "globalization with Chinese characteristics", which ponders whether it is possible to observe processes of glocalization driven more by Chinese interests and thus taking on a more "Sino-localized" outlook. This "Sino" element is related to the heuristic discourse of the return of the "Tianxia" order or Sinicized world order that has been developed and promoted by some Chinese public intellectuals and elites. In this imagined Sinicized world order, the current Western-led world order would be superseded by an international system more in line with Chinese culture, values, norms, and practices (Barabantseva 2009; Callahan 2007; Swain

2013). To this end, this essay seeks to forge a dialogue with the wider discussion in the social scientific community on the global–local dialectic in international cooperation and globalization.

Four Conceptual Schemes

The concept of glocalization in social science discourse was primarily developed in the work of Ronald Robertson (1992; 1994). In Robertson's view, globalization must be realized in concrete localized forms that are local because local actors always generate some response towards global influences. Building on this, Ritzer (2003) has sought to develop discussions of glocalization by delineating the analytical autonomy of the local, global, and glocal. Essentially, Ritzer distinguishes glocalization, which is more locally controlled, from the concept of "grobalization", which is more centrally controlled by entities such as multinational organizations. In his view, globalization is a process that involves many sub-processes which form a continuum with glocalization at one end and grobalization at the other. Glocalization, based on Ritzer's (2003: 189) definition, is the "integration of the global and the local", while grobalization is the "imposition of the global on the local". It should be noted that Ritzer uses the term grobalization because he has a particular focus on the imperialistic ambitions of countries and firms alike that desire to use the forces of globalization to exercise their power and influence and—in many cases—reap profits and grow (hence the term grobal) (Ritzer 2007: 192). Ritzer identifies four ideal types to further distinguish different kinds of grobalization and glocalization (Ritzer 2007: 194):

- *Glocal something* refers to a situation where global norms and practices are locally conceived and controlled, with distinctive substantive local content.
- *Glocal nothing* means that global norms and practices are locally conceived and controlled but barely reflect local culture.
- *Grobal something* is a situation where global norms and practices are highly commercialized and spread around the world, while also reflecting distinctive local cultural content.
- *Grobal nothing* is a situation where global norms and practices are highly commercialized and look identical, thus lacking any local distinctiveness.

While Ritzer focusses on the impact of commercially driven multinational entities, his conceptual schemes also provide a useful lens for looking at different processes of localization characterizing Chinese entities and projects in BRI countries. Indeed, Chinese globalization is diverse and dynamic, meaning that if one looks hard enough it is possible to find examples of all four of these frames. For instance, zooming in on "glocal nothing"—where globalization barely reflects local culture and practices—there are many cases of financial cooperation models between China and BRI recipient countries, where Chinese policy and commercial banks deliver the agreed monetary support to recipient states in accordance with local legal frameworks and norms. However, these financial practices are still subject to global financial system regulations. The Silk Road Fund for BRI projects, for example, was established in Beijing in 2014 with the mission to invest and offer financing support for trade and economic cooperation under BRI. It mirrors private equity and venture capital funds that existed before the BRI era, and the funding is supposed to operate according to international practices in the financial sector (Summers 2020: 149). As such, there is not

much local distinctiveness in this financing model.

There are not many examples of "grobal something" and "grobal nothing" yet. This is because most BRI projects have not yet been completed and fully commercialized, reaping substantial profits benefiting the Chinese cooperators and a few powerful elites in local recipient states. In Europe, for example, the current Sino–European railway projects in various countries largely depend on Chinese subsidies to operate. The Chinese government plans to reduce the subsidies gradually and let the projects run with real market mechanisms. This will take years to implement. Before then, not many financial benefits are likely to be generated to enable the projects to qualify as *grobal*.

Looking beyond Europe, Chinese FDI and profit margins in African states such as Kenya and Ethiopia are high. Here, Chinese companies can recover their initial investments in a few years and start to make considerable profits (Taylor and Zajontz 2020: 282). China has signed a variety of contracts to finance and construct BRI projects on the African continent that will probably yield high returns and, in a few years, mostly profit Chinese firms and elites in the local recipient states. Moreover, such deals can often help China gain access to other lucrative commercial contracts (Zajontz 2020; Chaziza 2021). We might expect to see empirical examples of *grobal something* or *grobal nothing* to arise in Africa in the near future.

Of the four frames, the one that is clearly most prevalent in the cases that we have studied is that of "glocal something", where processes of localization of Chinese projects and initiatives are characterized by local agency and take on a distinct local flavor. Cases in Serbia and Hungary illustrate this point.

"Glocal Something": Chinese Globalisation with Local Characteristics

"Glocal something"—where processes of globalization are imbued with local distinctiveness—has occurred in many countries' cooperative projects with China. For instance, this type of globalized localization can be observed in the Hungarian BRI project, the Budapest–Belgrade Railway. In 2016, the European Union (EU) discovered that member state Hungary had breached EU procurement laws that demand public tenders for large transport projects. In late 2017, the problem was solved when the Hungarian government finally agreed to announce a tender (Kancz 2020). However, criticisms are still being raised because the project was granted to a few politically powerful and well-connected people who were eager to get the deal with China, and concerns about future infringements remain. As such, Hungary is trying to appear to comply with good practices and global norms in public procurement to deflect criticism, seemingly an example of "glocal something" with globalized financing being shaped by more local regulations. Interestingly, however, global pressure is not coming from China; rather, it is the EU demands emerging from legal requirements for "good practice" in public procurement. At the same time, at the domestic level the Hungarian government is still finding ways to avoid fully complying with the pressure from outside. This example recalls the concept of "decoupling" proposed by world polity theorists such as John W. Meyer and his collaborators (1997), in which nation-states deliberately and strategically adopt the trappings of global norms to deflect criticism while their de facto practice is in non-compliance with the norms or legal rules.

Serbia is yet another geopolitical site with a strong Chinese presence that provides insight into the ways in which the local/regional intersect with and operate within global geopolitical and economic dynamics. Serbia

also provides a glimpse into the behaviors, rules, and norms promoted and enacted by both China and other foreign agents. The developments in Serbia that involve China and its (mostly BRI-related) investments are not only instructive examples of local agency and its impact on globalizing processes, but they also support, solidify, and expand the argument about China's operation within, not external to, the global, West-initiated capitalist system of production and exploitation (Franceschini and Loubere 2022).

Serbia–China dynamics have been heavily influenced by and firmly embedded in multiscalar exchanges with several geopolitical spaces/actors and the institutions, processes, and norms promoted therein. Most directly, the norms promoted by EU institutions and the exchanges with the individual EU states contribute significantly to the ways in which Serbia gets incorporated into and participates in supranational and global economic, political, and social flows. Unlike Hungary, Serbia is not an EU member, but it has been in the process of EU accession since 2012, when it obtained EU candidate status. The EU candidacy simultaneously brings Serbia a wide range of financial benefits through access to EU accession funds (downplayed as they are by President Aleksandar Vučić's regime), and imposes a set of requirements through which Serbia is becoming more deeply incorporated into transnational financial, political, and sociopolitical globalizing processes.

Under the umbrella of the potentiality of EU membership, Serbia has been exposed to and targeted by globalizing flows via yet another territorial, geopolitical, and/or imaginary assembly: "the Western Balkans". As a part of the Western Balkans, just like other former Yugoslav states and Albania, Serbia and its economy has been perceived to be less open and a "late arrival" to large capital flows (Kóczán 2017: 4), which, after the wars of the 1990s, transitioned toward market-based systems. In the words of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, "the region's economies opened up to the world [...] And just as Western Balkan firms were discovering new markets, foreign direct investment (FDI) into the region also took off" (Murgasova et al. 2015: 12).

It is important to emphasize that the investment patterns in the region point to the dynamics of contemporary capitalism—both regionally and globally—which involve "central" and "peripheral" postsocialist and postcolonial economies. As Miglena Todorova points out (2018), the Balkans are a good example of the links between foreign investment flow and postcolonial and postsocialist transitions. She argues that multiple intersecting events mark the dynamics of foreign investment in the region: the postcolonial and post-state socialist transitions of Chinese, Russian, Indian, and Balkan states to capitalism; Chinese, Indian, and Russian efforts to gain influence in the Balkans, Europe, and globally; as well as aspirations to financial, political, and cultural expansion particularly identifiable among non-Anglophone European "minor empires" such as Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands (Ibid.). The informed examination of complicated engagements and intertwined, competing, or expansionist desires of all these geopolitical actors in Serbia and the region of the Balkans not only render conceptions of metropolis–periphery, East–West, and first–second–third world misleading at best, but also directly challenges the popular notions of the Balkans as a geopolitical and cultural dumping ground where the needs, interests, and imaginations of external powers are only played out (Bartlett and Prica 2013 cited in Todorova 2018). Rather, postsocialist states in the Balkans actively seek the investment partners and forge political relations, the endeavors which connect them to other historical "peripheries", such as India and China. These links between postcolonial and postsocialist peripheries not

only influence the dynamics of global capitalism in the region, but also, as Todorova argues, "shape what happens at the Eurocentric 'center' and thereby affect the nature of global capitalism itself" (Todorova 2018: 4). It is precisely the Serbian governing regime's pursuit of investments and China's aspirations regarding its assertions and insertions into the global capitalist system that make a strong foundation for warm relations and the expansion of business interests between China and Serbia.

The BRI has been warmly welcomed by multiple actors in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe, with previously discussed Hungary, as well as Montenegro and Macedonia being just a few examples of the states that embrace Chinese capital. However, the Serbian government under Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party has been an exceptionally eager participant in the BRI. It has engaged with China unilaterally, and as a member of the 17+1, then 16+1, and most recently down to 14+1 initiative of the China–Central and Eastern European collaborative mechanism. As Vučić himself explained in 2019: "[T]here is something special that binds our two countries and peoples, as well as the Communist Party and the SNS [Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party], as the two largest parties (in China and Serbia)" (B92 2019). As he further explained: "It's important for Serbia to cooperate with China as it's a great power, which, unlike others, doesn't exert pressure on our country," adding that "in Serbia, the Chinese are not only respected and valued, but also liked" (Ibid.).

This affective narrative, carefully created and strategically utilized by the governing Serbian regime and its supporters, has served both China and Serbia well. Or, more precisely, it has served the governing regimes of both states well. With a documented flow of 1.6 billion Euros of Chinese investments between 2010 and 2019 (RSA 2020), China gets its most reliable "iron-clad friendship" partner and investment hub in Europe (Bieber and Tzifakis 2020). Chinese entities are also able to push through lucrative yet environmentally damaging projects (Biznis.rs 2022) that breach international labor standards (Rogelja and Tsimonis 2023) through untransparent and allegedly corrupt business deals (Đukić Pejić 2022; Krivelj 2021). On the other hand, Vučić gets, in his own terms, "unpressured" collaboration with a super-power partner that invests in projects that are crucial for maintaining and enlarging his political power, and which gives him leverage in national and international affairs.

In the relationships that have emerged between the regimes and regime-related businesses from both Serbia and China, Chinese companies are celebrated for building new roads, highways, bridges, and high-speed railway lines, all of which figure notably in Vučić's and his SNS's political campaigns. The "win-win" mechanism is similar in the case of Covid-related laboratories and medical equipment, and for the engagement of Huawei in Serbia's digitalization and Smart City projects (Nash 2022). The mutuality of interests is observable in the operation of Hesteel and Zijin Mining, the two Chinese companies that acquired the industrial giants Železara Smederevo and RTB Bor. The arrival and work of Hesteel and Zijin provides a foundation for the Serbian government's framing of Chinese investments as the savior of the Serbian economy at the local, regional, and national levels, if not "the state" itself (RTS 2018). In turn, as the ones who brought the Chinese investors to these industrial conglomerates, Vučić and his party frame themselves as revitalizing the economy and leading Serbia to a brighter future (Tanjug 2019).

Lastly, it is vital to note that despite China's prominent presence in Serbia, the Serbian government did not turn away Western

investors nor derail Serbia's participation in EU and US-dominated globalizing processes (Karabeg 2019). As political analyst Janja Klasinc (2021) observes with regard to the divergence between public perception and actual figures related to foreign investments in Serbia, it is the politics, media (especially television), and the people's perception of friendships with other nations that creates the majority popular opinion that China is the country most supportive of Serbia. Research on public opinion in Serbia conducted by the Institute of European Affairs in 2021 revealed that a greater part of the Serbian public sees China as the biggest supporter of the country, even though the EU is, according to the official data, both the biggest donor and biggest foreign direct investor, followed by the US (Ibid.) Thus, although the representational mechanisms which divert public attention to China's "friendship" with Serbia and Serbia's participation in China-involved globalization are in full swing, the data about the flows of capital point to the persistence of the processes through which Serbia continues to undergo Western capital-involved globalization. The Serbian case, like that of Hungary, is not only an instructive and implicative example of "glocal something", with globalization taking on a distinctly local flavor, but it also supports, solidifies, and expands the argument about China's operation within, not external to, the global, West-initiated capitalist system.

Increasing Chinese Globalization in a Western-led World

Determining whether global forces can replace the local or whether the local can be pulled into a globally embedded structure requires long-term empirical investigation (Hoogenboom et al. 2010: 933). As most BRI projects are in their early or middle stages of development, we have yet to witness clear empirical evidence of China-led globalization, glocalization, or even grobalization in the BRI context. As BRI projects find their way in various recipient countries, some level of localization will take place. Both globalization and glocalization in BRI context are developing gradually, but these projects and their related initiatives (e.g., funding bodies such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB]) are still very much bounded within existing Western-led or US-led processes of globalization.

Some observers (e.g., Hong 2015; Dove 2016) have perceived the birth of the AIIB as one of Beijing's strategies for revising an international development order that is dominated by Western standards and practices. However, the AIIB has been operating according to existing international norms and standards, even in cooperation with supposed competitors such as the World Bank and other international financial institutions. Given that the AIIB was founded by China, it does have "Chinese characteristics", such as greater emphasis on the norm of non-interference in its operations (Summers 2020: 149). However, from one of the authors' conversations with anonymous staff at other international financial institutions, AIIB experts have visited them, and the AIIB's Chinese staff have endeavored to capture the best practices of these organizations. This is in line with what the Chinese government has repeatedly stressed in public statements—that Beijing works closely with existing institutions to advance the cause of the AIIB (Mitchell and Farchy 2016). As Yu (2017: 362) clarifies, even though competition with these institutions exists, "the infrastructure construction market is large enough" for different institutions to "compete amicably".

China may want to use BRI projects to increase its influence and change the current system, but it cannot avoid following the embedded rules in running these initiatives. Moreover, the institutional design of the AIIB makes it not

purely a Chinese project. As Yu elaborates, the AIIB has many Prospective Founding Members (PFMs), and more will join in the future, so "although China founded the AIIB and is its largest shareholder, it is not a Chinese bank and neither does it belong to China". The founding members "will put pressure on China to increase the operational transparency of the bank and stick to strict lending principles by ensuring environmental and social safeguards are adhered to in financing infrastructure projects" (Yu 2017: 366).

In this vein, we may contend that at the current stage of BRI development, China's operations are formed and limited "by the distribution and nature of structural power in the global political economy" (Summers 2020: 150). In other words, Chinese actors generally operate and are socialized within the confines of Western-led globalization. The Western-led global economy with all its entrenched inequalities and detrimental modes of extraction in the Global South has not changed much. China's projects merely serve to reflect and even deepen the contradictions inherent in the current system.

At the same time, however, it is possible to observe examples of China-involved globalization, including BRI projects, that foster greater connectivity between continents, countries, and societies. Each locality will inevitably have its own path of acceptance or resistance regarding these forces from above. As with previous waves of globalization, state actors and local actors still have the agency to navigate international influence and negotiate solutions that serve their own interests.

Final Thoughts: China's Strategic Integration into the Global System

Finally, it is vital to stress that China's socialization into the global system is not without strategic choices. Socialization is done selectively, as long as it serves China's interests. When the EU signed a Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure with Japan in late 2019, observers interpreted this as the EU's attempt to signal to China that it does not support China-led connectivity projects that are often deprived of "good" norms, such as sustainability, equality, level playing fields, and transparency (e.g., Esteban and Armanini 2020; Okana-Heijmans 2019). Right before the signing of the partnership, there was a similar agreement between the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). There is evidence that since the EU–Japan partnership was signed, China has tried, at least rhetorically, to propose "better" approaches for realizing its BRI projects in line with EU norms (Okana-Heijmans 2019). China's reaction to the EU–Japan partnership seems to indicate that Beijing is willing to be socialized into international norms, at least selectively, for the benefit of its own BRI projects.

Interestingly, international arbitration of disputes in BRI cooperation might be an area where we see more of China's reluctance and resistance towards international socialization (Grgić 2019: 52; Liukkunen 2020: 273–274). Two new courts have been set up in Xi'an and Shenzhen to handle BRI-related disputes. Like other Chinese tribunals, these courts are part of the Chinese judicial system, and they are meant to serve China's core national interests, not those of other nations (Sausmikat and Sprick 2019). Currently, China recognizes the judgements of very few courts in other countries, making it difficult for China to accept foreign judicial decisions. Yet, to facilitate the realization of its BRI ambitions at the international level, Beijing has agreed to use the New York Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards to facilitate BRI arbitration. "Nearly all of the countries involved in the BRI are already party to the New York Convention,

with the exception of Turkmenistan, Yemen, Timor-Leste and Iraq" (David et al. 2019: 31). Again, examples such as this prove that the BRI is still restricted by existing Western-led globalization processes, even in the area of legal arbitration. China-led globalization is not taking shape at full scope and speed yet. If we consider this together with the fact that locals always have the power to negotiate how the BRI plays out on the ground, we can conclude that both China-led globalization and Sino-localization will increasingly become important forces in the future.

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