

No Battle between Good and Evil

Jan Turowski on China's Belt and Road Initiative

Dr Jan Turowski is the head of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung's regional office in Beijing. From 2013 until 2019 he was professor of political science at Southeast University, in the eastern Chinese mega-city Nanjing. Among other topics, his research was focussed on the fields of socialism and transformation. This interview was conducted by journalist **Kathrin Gerlof** in early December 2020.



Before we go into the Belt and Road Initiative in-depth: How are things at the Beijing office? How has the work of Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in China been impacted by the pandemic?

population. Secondly, there is an expectation in society that the government steps in in situations like this.

However, with respect to the RLS's work in China, it is precisely the 10 percent missing between the current situation and complete normalcy that poses problems for us. As China is wary of a second wave of infections, especially one that might occur via imported cases, a set of very strict travel restrictions and quarantine obligations remains in place. These measures make it impossible for us to pursue core aspects of our work, such as international conferences and workshops, delegation trips, and forums for discussion—and will likely continue to do so for quite some time.

Apart from these formal and technical constraints, the realignment of our work that we had embarked on in recent years has been accelerated by the pandemic. German me-

JT: Thank you for asking. We are doing well. The number of new infections has been low for months, and whenever a new hotspot of infection does appear, it seems to be quickly stamped out and brought back under control by the authorities. I would say that life is almost 90 percent back to normal. Our office has also been mostly back to our usual routine for months. Kindergartens, schools, and universities are open, and restaurants and subways are packed. In retrospect, I would say that China's approach to the coronavirus pandemic has made two things clear. Firstly, the Chinese state is an effective institution, able to think strategically and to mobilize the

Firstly, the Chinese state is an effective institution, able to think strategically and to mobilize the population. Secondly, there is an expectation in society that the government steps in in situations like this.

2 dia coverage of China's COVID-19 measures, and the discussion of China's crisis response policy in its various phases, especially when in comparison with the German approach, brought a great deal of dormant Sinophobia to the surface. More than ever, it will thus be our task to relay Chinese discourses to Germany, to foster contact to and knowledge of China in Germany and encourage a more nuanced and better-informed debate about the People's Republic.

The Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the so-called "New Silk Road", has been the subject of particularly intense debate in Germany and worldwide. What objectives is China pursuing with this gigantic project?

JT: It is more like a bundling together of a number of quite diverse objectives, ones

which are only slowly becoming concrete, and which have changed over time, not least because of influences from other countries. Of course, those goals are disparate according to the different interests of various actors. The West has generated a plethora of reductionist analyses and approaches that focus solely on the geostrategic or economic dimensions of the BRI, or purport to have uncovered a hidden agenda behind it.

After examining the Chinese government's own statements concerning the BRI and reducing the multitude of official statements to a broadly applicable formula, it might be said that the aim of the BRI is the revitalization of the Eurasian economic zone in a way that may transform it into a global motor of growth through its connections to Africa and South East Asia. Connectivity is supposed to be bolstered by the development of infrastructure, the creation of trade relations, and the consolidation of a network of key cities.

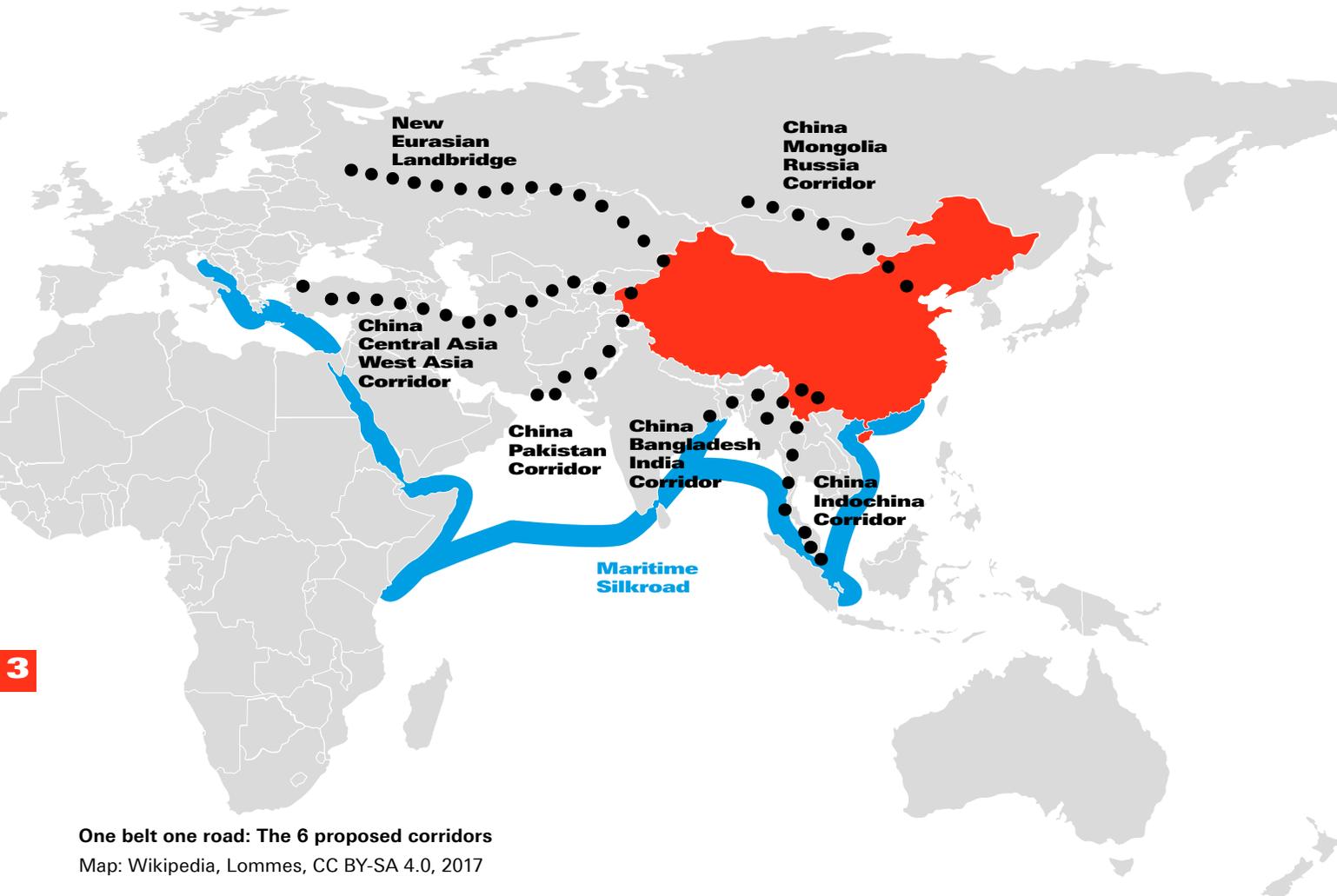
On the one hand, the initiative encompasses a whole range of different actors in China, such as provincial and city governments, and state-owned and private enterprises including banks, Confucius Institutes, and universities. On the other hand, this cooperation is also taking place within a number of quite different frameworks, such as multilateral institutions and bilateral relationships.

Of course, there are additional goals from a Chinese perspective, namely the stimulation of external demand for Chinese commodities, services, and capital in the medium- and long-term. Additionally, the BRI offers an opportunity to invest the gigantic accumulation of foreign exchange outside of China, and in this way prevent financial bubbles inside the Chinese economy. In some countries, the provision of infrastructure is intended to facilitate the extraction of raw materials and thus alleviate China's dependence on other countries—in recent years, primarily Austral-

ia and Brazil. In addition, the BRI is intended to strengthen the economic dynamics of the less developed western and southern provinces of China through greater cooperation with their neighbouring countries, and the creation of an economic hinterland. Finally, China also wants to diversify its trade routes so as to make its imports and exports independent of sea routes and the USA, which could potentially impose embargoes.

Considering the state's role in influencing the initiative's direction and the logic of the bureaucratic institutions at the helm of its realization, I would say that the BRI is undoubtedly and centrally an economic initiative. This does not mean, however, that its geostrategic impact can or should be ignored. Even if the real impacts might only be able to be assessed in a few decades, it is already obvious today that the Belt and Road Initiative will have a long-lasting impact on global economic and power structures.

German media coverage of China's COVID-19 measures, and the discussion of China's crisis response policy in its various phases, especially when in comparison with the German approach, brought a great deal of dormant Sinophobia to the surface.



One belt one road: The 6 proposed corridors

Map: Wikipedia, Lommes, CC BY-SA 4.0, 2017

The aim of the BRI is the revitalization of the Eurasian economic zone in a way that may transform it into a global motor of growth through its connections to Africa and South East Asia. Connectivity is supposed to be bolstered by the development of infrastructure, the creation of trade relations, and the consolidation of a network of key cities.

Half a century ago, centralized planning came under fire in China, while the market economy was still seen as a capitalist one-way street. By now the country—which in our media is usually mentioned with the phrase “economic powerhouse China”—has accomplished a globally unique synthesis of planned and market economies. China is known to be incredibly resourceful in the testing of mixed economic approaches, which all have the final aim of being economically successful and setting an unparalleled pace. A project like the New Silk Road therefore appears entirely logical. Is it fair to say that the idea for such a project could only be conceived in China?

JT: As the 14th five-year plan has been intensively discussed here over the past few months, it makes sense to first of all provide a brief description of what characterizes the Chinese planned economy in its specific combination with a dynamic market economy, and how this differs from the Soviet model of the past. In contradistinction to Soviet planned economy, contemporary Chinese five-year plans do not feature a fixed allocation of resources, rigid volume planning, or price fixing, but instead work via broad—albeit hierarchized—general goals, as well as other mechanisms such as credit control, funding programmes, and “experimental zones”. In this approach to macroeconomic planning, governmental administration, the party, and companies align themselves along strategic “axes” and work towards political goals. While those goals are determined centrally, political instruments are developed and tested in local, sometimes competing, reform



In contradistinction to Soviet planned economy, contemporary Chinese five-year plans do not feature a fixed allocation of resources, rigid volume planning, or price fixing, but instead work via broad—albeit hierarchized—general goals, as well as other mechanisms such as credit control, funding programmes, and “experimental zones”.

experiments and only then applied nationwide.

Though the BRI is a separately designed economic initiative, it was integrated into the 13th five-year plan in 2015, and consequently now forms part of higher-level political goals. In terms of its practical implementation, however, it remains diverse, open, and variable depending on local context. Seen this way, the BRI indeed appears to be a quite typical developmental strategy of the Chinese state, and which can also be placed in the tradition of large projects such as the Great Wall or the Grand Canal.

But in respect to the question whether only China could develop the idea for such a project and put it into practice as a strategy, I would err on the side of caution. The BRI is not, as it is often described in the West, a vast and coherent geopolitical masterplan, thought out from the strategic planning stage through to implementation to realization. Indeed, it is much closer to a heterogeneous collection of projects, driven by highly varied actors, with respectively diverse goals and expectations. The BRI ties into previous initiatives like the Great Western Development Strategy or the Going Global Strategy as well as contemporary developmental programmes, and indeed has absorbed them. All of this is corralled together and communi-

cated about under the banner of the BRI, but if you look at the multitude of programmes, projects, actors, and goals that this covers (without losing sight of the likely geopolitical and geoeconomic implications) it is no different from what the West has been doing with its programmes, projects, investments, and geopolitical strategies for as far back as you care to look.

We should also not forget that it was not so long ago that European states were also realizing large infrastructure projects and turning political visions into institutions. But 40 years of neoliberalism have underfunded and deconstructed the state in the European context and have discredited and restricted state intervention. In China, on the other hand, the economic reforms of the last few decades were accompanied by the development of state structures through which the state and public institutions—which in the Maoist period were rather activist and informal—steadily built up their expertise and capacities. The difference between China and the West in terms of states’ capacities to initiate and realize such projects is thus not so much cultural or systemic, but rather the outcome of political decisions made over the last few decades.

Can China provide a counter-model to Western capitalism?

The difference between China and the West in terms of states' capacities to initiate and realize such projects is thus not so much cultural or systemic, but rather the outcome of political decisions made over the last few decades.

Sai Ge Guang Chang, Shenzhen Shi, China

Photo: unsplash.com, Denys Nevozhai



5

JT: Yes, China's model of development can be seen as a counter-model to the West. I believe most observers of China are in agreement on this. The difficult and controversial question, though, is what sort of counter-model it provides. Does China represent a specific, even worse version of capitalism, or a socialism with Chinese characteristics? Does China's economic rise give us cause for worry about what the future and a China-shaped capitalism will look like? Or should it embolden us about the possibilities for different paths of development and modernization? As things currently stand, these two positions on how to assess the "Chinese Model" are irreconcilable.

But this debate is often rather unproductive, as it is based on dichotomous characterizations in terms of "capitalism" versus "socialism". We still carry this 20th century baggage around with us, even though it is of extremely limited use in the analysis and

categorization of China, or for contemporary debates about socialism generally. Furthermore, the economic, social, and political transformation of China is far from complete. And when I consider the pace and depth with which China has changed over the past 40 years, and how these rapid changes are continuing, it seems likely that I will be able to witness a possible endpoint of this transformation within my lifetime, and at that point be able to answer many questions about socialism or capitalism.

In many ways, China has taken inspiration from other Asian models of growth and development, such as Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, or Japan, and to some extent even copied them. Common to all these models is that catch-up modernization was implemented in an authoritarian and planned manner, from top to bottom, over and above all individual interests or resistance. Despite this, China's developmental path exhibits specific

differences to the other Asian models that at least keep open the possibility that this transformation—after modernization has been completed and economic development and prosperity have been achieved—does not end up in bourgeois-parliamentary capitalism.

I think what makes the debate about the Chinese model so interesting are the options and potentials for development that still exist within the system, and which could turn out either positively or negatively—depending on the national and international power constellation. We are yet to reach the end of history!

The BRI is inconceivable without the concept of globalization. And at the same time, it's a testing ground for the extent to which globalization can be used and enacted according to the dictates of a planned economy. The western version of globalization follows

the logic of capital and is politically shaped by the dictates of corporations. What does the Chinese version of globalization look like within the framework of the BRI?

JT: I agree that the project can only be thought about in connection to globalization. Globalization unevenly distributes opportunities and risks. And in the case of the BRI too, we must take a closer look and figure out who will benefit. What does China get out of the BRI? What do the other nation states involved stand to gain? Here we must be sure to differentiate between developing and developed nations. What are the opportunities for economic development? What are the various geopolitical prospects for a multipolar world order? What are the possibilities and hopes? What are the actual consequences, areas of potential conflict, and contradictions?

Does China represent a specific, even worse version of capitalism, or a socialism with Chinese characteristics?

Does China's economic rise give us cause for worry about what the future and a China-shaped capitalism will look like?

Or should it embolden us about the possibilities for different paths of development and modernization?

6 Generally, I believe that BRI supplies the spaces and possibilities for an alternative globalization: on the one hand through new global institutions and structures, and on the other—and I think this is much more important—through a totally different style and a totally different manner of proceeding than those of the neoliberal globalization of the past decades. Neoliberal globalization is primarily characterized by the idea that borders are made permeable, and markets are opened, held together by an at best abstract set of policies. The “invisible hand” of the market is supposed to take care of the rest. This neoliberal globalization opened markets, reduced regulations and hindered any form of intervention by the state. This was mostly to the benefit of transnational corporations, whose almost unlimited power societies and states have barely been able to oppose. Politics almost inevitably took a passive stance towards globalization.

In the model of globalization that manifests within the BRI, on the other hand, states cooperate directly, and in this way take on a specific responsibility for projects and their realization. It is these cooperation agreements that enable states to actively shape the ongoing processes that result from globalization, and to which corporations will have to subordinate themselves.

Of course, the dangers and contradictions of BRI globalization are also apparent. Firstly, the cooperation between China and other countries—thus, to some extent highly unequal partners—harbours the danger of Beijing imposing the conditions of cooperation on the weaker partner. Asymmetrical interdependence potentially forces these states into economic and political dependence on China. It is therefore all the more irksome that Germany and the European Union refuse to join the BRI, as competition introduced via stronger negotiating partners is precisely

what could strengthen the position of the weaker ones. Secondly, there is the danger that states refuse to take on the social, political, and environmental responsibility for these cooperative projects—or are simply not capable of doing so. This process is only exacerbated in contexts where there is no local control through civil society or countervailing powers. Thirdly, a binding, general, and enforceable framework that takes social and environmental needs into account must be set. This framework must be applicable to all countries and stakeholders, especially for states that on their own have only limited powers of enforcement or sanctioning.

My biggest worry is that the Chinese model of growth of the 1990s and 2000s—which might have been successful in terms of development but came at a high social and environmental cost—is now going to be exported unthinkingly and uncorrected to other countries. While China is now making

big progress in the development of a sustainable and environmentally-sound economy, the problems associated with the country's dirty industries, outdated technologies and procedures, and depleted natural environment should not now be exported to the countries which will be encompassed by the “New Silk Road”. Preventing this can only be achieved through multilateral cooperation between all participating countries. It goes without saying that you cannot simply brush aside these dangers and contradictions while naively overlooking powerful interests. And you have to work actively and critically for change.

The BRI is not yet a grand overarching strategy that would represent a counter-model to all the established mechanisms, rules, and values that characterize the existing international order. The initiative can nevertheless be seen as a proactive Chinese response to the growing complexity of the world. As an

I think what makes the debate about the Chinese model so interesting are the options and potentials for development that still exist within the system, and which could turn out either positively or negatively—depending on the national and international power constellation. We are yet to reach the end of history!



Mombasa Port, Kenya, Indian Ocean

Photo: Wikipedia, MEAACT Kenya

While China is now making big progress in the development of a sustainable and environmentally-sound economy, the problems associated with the country's dirty industries, outdated technologies and procedures, and depleted natural environment should not now be exported to the countries which will be encompassed by the "New Silk Road".

alternative approach to globalization, the BRI proposes a rather different dynamic for the future organization of international politics. It represents a loose political concept in which new mechanisms of cooperation are created, or into which already established institutions and running projects are able to be integrated. The BRI is primarily an opportunity for an alternative globalization because I do not see another country or actor capable of presenting a serious and powerful challenge to neoliberal globalization, or of challenging the monopoly on globalization currently held by the West.

How are the "New Silk Road" and the conceivable aspirations for a share of global power discussed in China? Are there critical voices?

JT: When President Xi Jinping initially proposed a "New Silk Road" during his 2013 speech in Kazakhstan, it was little more than an idea. But this idea then quickly permeated Chinese academic, political, and public discourse, and became a dominant and all-encompassing concept, both in terms of foreign policy and regional relationships, but also with respect to domestic policy. Initially, the terms "New Silk Road" or "One Belt, One Road" were rather abstract, basically saying nothing and everything at the same time. But this is quite characteristic of Chinese politics. The introduction of initially empty political phrases is typical for the establishment of new political concepts and slogans. Other examples of this are concepts like "Harmonious Society", "the Chinese Dream", "Socialist Eco-civilization" or "China's peaceful rise".

When such political terms are initially introduced, the Chinese government usu-

ally intends to provide as little information as possible about what these concepts and slogans actually signify. However, this ambiguity creates space for lively debates in science, the media, and among the public more broadly. Most concepts only offer starting points or end goals for this discussion; they do not yet represent comprehensive or detailed political programmes. Indeed, these concepts rely on the work of scientists, experts, and political decision-makers, who work out concrete ways in which they can be implemented and try to further clarify their content. In this respect Chinese leadership encourages think tanks, research institutes, and diverse branches of government, as well as provincial governments, to hold international workshops and conferences on all levels everywhere in the country, in order to stimulate and refine the discourse around a given topic.

This is exactly what happened with the BRI: the initial idea stimulated debate, the debate concretized the programme, and the programme in turn stimulated further discussion about goals and possibilities.

Against this backdrop, the public debate, and especially that within academia, can be divided into three phases or sets of questions. From 2013 to circa 2015 the questions circulated around why China was proposing a Belt and Road Initiative and whether China needed such an initiative. 2014 and 2015 saw the organization of a large number of panels in various Chinese provinces, with the participation of numerous local cadres, which added a stronger domestic, localized, and socio-economic dimension to the project. From 2016 onwards the challenges, problems, and risks posed by the BRI were more intensively discussed, with criticism

As an alternative approach to globalization, the BRI proposes a rather different dynamic for the future organization of international politics. It represents a loose political concept in which new mechanisms of cooperation are created, or into which already established institutions and running projects are able to be integrated. The BRI is primarily an opportunity for an alternative globalization because I do not see another country or actor capable of presenting a serious and powerful challenge to neoliberal globalization, or of challenging the monopoly on globalization currently held by the West.

and demands from abroad becoming of increased importance. And finally, starting from 2019, the debate has been shaped by the sharpened confrontation between China and the USA.

I at least have not come across any explicit pretensions to “major power” status in the context of these discussions—at most between the lines, perhaps—and even now, with this confrontation playing out within the context of a so-called “new Cold War”, the rhetoric appears to be more defensive than anything.

In terms of the broader public debate? Well, discussion within the media is in the first place not exactly free, and in addition I would also say that the Chinese public is in large part quite parochial or focused on specific detail. The BRI only becomes a controversial topic in the context of regional discussions, when there are direct—positive or negative—effects on the respective regions and municipalities. Of course, you will always find criticism on social media, in the sense of: what will this cost us? Could that money not be spent within the country? Coveted scholarships being awarded to foreign students also causes resentment. But on the whole, the BRI is met with relatively mild, non-euphoric approval in China.

The relationship to China is a subject of controversial discussion, also on the left side of the political spectrum. The debate fluctuates between demonization and uncritical support—and covers all the shades in between. How does the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung handle this, in terms of being active in the country and having an office there?

JT: It is my impression that “uncritical support” at the very least is in the process of dying out. Because even people calling for a more complex and differentiated approach to China always emphasize that this approach does not exclude criticism. I believe that the left’s relationship to China currently has two rather unfortunate dimensions. On the one hand, the left is hounded and driven by an increasingly confrontational bourgeois and anti-communist discourse with respect to China. Instead of fostering our own left-wing and more nuanced China discourse, we find ourselves merely reacting, and feel obliged to distance ourselves. On the other hand—and this is the internal dimension—we also carry on a fairly vehement debate about whether leftists are even allowed to criticize China at all.

In my opinion it’s a sham discussion, because of course we can and should criticize China, the

Chinese Communist Party, the economic model, and so on. I am however somewhat irritated by the fact that the right to criticize China is emphasized in advance, without the need for accurate knowledge of the country’s history and development, its constraints and options for action, or any effort being put into understanding China in terms of its own logic. We have to develop our own left-wing China discourse, which as such could also be very critical but would at least have to take place at a level of complexity necessary for such discussions.

I can criticize Chinese labour laws and demand improvements, for example, but must then also acknowledge what has been accomplished in this area over the last few years. I can point out the deficits of the healthcare system but must at the same time acknowledge that China has, over the last decade, built a healthcare system under which at this point 97 percent of the population is insured. That is a unique achievement for an emerging nation. I can point out the immense environmental destruction of the last few decades but also be impressed by the government’s environmental policy, particularly as it has developed over the last few years. Above all: a model which lifted over 800 million people out of poverty and clambered from being a developing country to being the biggest

economy in the world should be treated with genuine curiosity and interest.

With the rise of China, more than two hundred years of Western political and economic supremacy could be approaching their end. The New Silk Roads are also a symbol of a new level of self-confidence. What does that mean for the West and for China’s relations to the rest of the world?

JT: When I was a student in the 1990s, “the end of eurocentrism” was a fashionable phrase. In every discussion, someone would emphasize at least once that eurocentrism was now coming to its end. The problem back then and to this day is that no one was able to imbue this phrase with content and substance. Then, as now, we analyze, evaluate, and categorize the world according to Western standards, and constantly make comparisons to standards derived from the history of Western development.

What has changed massively over the last years, however—not least because of China’s rise—is the movement of the gravitational centre of the global economy away from the North Atlantic and the Global North, and towards the Global South. By 2030 the

We have to develop our own left-wing China discourse, which as such could also be very critical but would at least have to take place at a level of complexity necessary for such discussions.

Global South, which includes China (and 85 percent of the world's population overall), will produce 67 percent of the world's GDP. It is not possible to uphold an international system in which the overwhelming majority of the world's population is not represented. The West is cognizant of this but is yet to accept it—as the rise, rhetoric, and politics of Donald Trump have shown over the past few years—and will massively resist its relative decline.

9 What role does Confucianism play in this? Economist and China expert Isabella Weber talks about the fierce debate taking place in China over whether this tradition, thousands of years old, still has a strong impact on the development of the economy, bureaucracy, the state and philosophy today. What is your opinion?

JT: Not only in China but also in East Asia generally, Confucianism plays an important and deeply rooted role. But you have to be careful to not reduce Confucianism to its emphasis on order or its state philosophy. Confucianism comprises three components: a theory of pedagogy and education, a moral system, and a political philosophy. Against this backdrop the state is understood as an entity meant to guarantee order, social welfare, and moral education.

As a framework this is certainly very useful in explaining contemporary China as well. Nevertheless, I would be cautious not to overstate the role of Confucianism. On the one hand, over the course of a 3000-year history there have been quite a few Neo-Confucianisms, focused on highly differing state philosophies and interpreting those in diverse ways. In the 10th century, for example, Confucianists confronting the issue of land brought the whole system into question, and the moral maxims of Confucianism unleashed a remarkable socially revolutionary energy in different historical contexts. In the 19th and 20th century, Confucianism was used to justify socialism and capitalism, nationalism, authoritarianism, or democracy, depending on the context. In addition, other traditions of thought are also present in China, such as Daoism, Legalism, and Buddhism, and in more recent history also the critics of Chinese traditionalism in the wake of the “May Fourth Movement” of 1919 as well as Western cultural influences. And let's not forget Marxism.

But yes, the high social standing and efficiency of public administration, the emphasis on education, and the acceptance of a strong and massively interventionist state have cultural, i.e., Confucianist, roots, and this (among many other aspects) makes the Chinese model of development unique.

Suez Canal

Photo: Wikipedia, Daniel Csörföly



Let us get back to the New Silk Road project, which is dividing opinions worldwide. In Asia and Africa, it is being met with strong approval, while scepticism prevails elsewhere, as the aversion to a powerful China is strong.

JT: In the West, there is a very popular narrative according to which China wants to

expand its global influence through the BRI, and above all that China is seeking to make an authoritarian model of development more presentable. In the USA in particular there are grave concerns about China's soft power approaches as a threat to democracy, primarily in Africa. In this narrative—and not just for Trumpists—China is not only an economic or geopolitical competitor but also a mor-

al one, to be confronted on moral grounds. This conflict is stylized as a final battle for the world's future.

This narrative has already become manifest in the creation of concrete guidelines and laws: limitations imposed on Chinese scientists and almost any kind of intellectual cooperation, closure of Confucius Institutes, and restrictions against Chinese students. This notion of Chinese indoctrination and the spread of authoritarian models of development is applied to all kinds of Chinese engagement. If money comes from China, then the Western view is that the only possible goal of such funding would be to indoctrinate whoever receives it. Everything the Chinese government does, or sponsors is seen as an exertion of influence, and is thus understood as a kind of malignant activity. In fact, many countries, including Germany, do spend money on public diplomacy. China's approach isn't any different in this regard.

Furthermore, all allegations tend to treat China as a kind of monolithic actor, even though a multitude of highly different stakeholders with different motivations and aspirations are active within the BRI.

And finally—and this too relates to Western arrogance—the scale of Chinese activities is frequently mistaken for the effects that they produce. Young Africans learning Chinese and young Pakistanis wanting to study in China are not the hapless victims of Chinese indoctrination.

Even if I do not share the assessment that the governments of developing nations are being made the unhappy victims of a predatory Beijing through the BRI, this does not mean that there are no risks, fault lines, contradictions, or tensions. It also cannot be ruled out that individual actors, particularly

corporations, are exploiting weaknesses and enriching themselves in an unbridled fashion. All of this must be analyzed objectively. However, paranoid construals of the BRI as the terrain of a struggle between good and evil are anything other than helpful.]

Above all: a model which lifted over 800 million people out of poverty and clambered from being a developing country to being the biggest economy in the world should be treated with genuine curiosity and interest.

The interview was conducted in German
and edited by Nadja Dorschner,
Yana Kravtsova and Stefan Mentschel.

English translation
by Sam Langer and Ryan Evers