

What's Wrong with Development? The Geopolitics of The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

By [Keith Lamb](#)

Global Research, October 08, 2020

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

The Belt and Road Initiative seeks to bring development to the world. Why is this a problem for the USA and some of its Western allies? Keith Lamb explains why.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a series of, land and sea, infrastructure projects that will link up the “world-island” that is Africa and Eurasia. Should the West join then railway tunnels, under both the Gibraltar and Bering Straits, will link-up the world.

However, so far, the West has reflected its worst history onto the BRI, “marketing” it as a Chinese neo-imperial plan to dominate the world through “debt-trap diplomacy”. For example, 70% of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota being leased out, for 99 years to a Chinese venture, is widely disseminated as proof of this.

Largely, unreported is that the Chinese debt still stands because this soft-debt is not the problem. Hambantota was leased out to pay back private capital lenders who comprise the majority of Sri Lanka’s debt.

Western apprehension over the BRI is sold as concerns over human rights. However, even recent history shows that material priorities undermine the smoke and mirrors of human rights discourse.

For example, the Western destruction of Libya and Iraq, usually labelled as “interventions”, which linguistically conceals tragic human rights atrocities, was paradoxically justified through liberal human rights narratives, much of which turned out to be atrocity propaganda.

In fact, Western support for jihadi groups in Libya and the invasion of Iraq launched from Saudi Arabia, a state with a worse human rights record than Iraq, belies human rights explanations.

While both states had oil wealth to be plundered, Libya and Iraq also presented a systemic threat to US hegemony. Both challenged the US’s exorbitant dollar privilege. Gaddafi sought to create a gold-backed African Dinar and Saddam started selling oil in Euros.

The carnage caused in both countries, and others across the world, is flippantly dismissed as unintended consequences to what were otherwise good intentions. However, the strategy of keeping the world in a state of uneven development through war and sovereign interference is no accident and it is precisely this status quo that the BRI resists.

Having a hegemonic power like the USA, and previously Britain presents a systemic disincentive to developing the majority of the earth. This is because both powers are geographically disconnected from the continents they seek to administer. This fact was also the case for previous European colonialists too.

European empires differed from those that came before them. They were multi-transcontinental, and parcelled-out across the globe, rather than being in one continuous civilizational space. This succeeded because Western powers possessed superior war and naval technology.

Consequently, Western monopoly capitalism intertwined with colonialism was built on controlling the seas. This is not just a historical fact it is a current reality too. The USA, with its invisible neo-colonial empire, is far from the majority of the earth's inhabitants on the world-island. As such, it dominates largely through naval projection.

Keeping the mass of trade oceanic means that, he who controls the seas controls the world. Development of the inlands, which would bring about poverty relief to the mass of humanity, would create boundless competition to naval hegemony.

Furthermore, inland development away from sea routes is harder to dominate and economic expansion there leads to augmenting the military strength of states who could then resist hegemonic belligerence. Therefore, both Britain and the USA have sought to privilege their sea power and prevent continental competition.

Britain fearing losing its monopoly through the Suez Canal restricted German economic expansion across Eurasia. The building of the Berlin-Bagdad railway, just at a time when oil was discovered in Iran, was an underlying factor for the outbreak of WWI. In Eurasia imperial Russia was always frustrated by Britain's "great game".

The USA buttresses countries around the edges of states which are capable of developing the world-island. For example, with the rise of the USSR and the PRC; Germany, Japan, and the Tiger economies received preferential economic treatment.

After the collapse of the USSR, when the Washington Consensus inflicted deprivation upon the Russian people, US relations with Russia were first-rate. However, today Russia, though capitalist, is no longer a basket-case and consequently faces the US's ire. The privileging of sea power and opposition to continental development is likewise played out in the Nord Stream saga.

When China was poor, from the late-seventies though governed by the CPC, it also enjoyed positive relations with the US. It was theorized that integration into the existing liberal capitalist world-order would inevitably lead to its collapse.

However, China though accepting the Western created multilateral order and the WTO trading system, now also faces the indignation of the current US naval hegemon.

This is because China has become a technological powerhouse and broken free from the role assigned to it of producing the world's "tat". It has proven that capital overseen by state power produces rapid development which defies the order of uneven development which disadvantages the inlands.

Unlike the USA, China is firmly entrenched within the world-island and so cannot follow a similar naval hegemonic strategy. China borders powerful nuclear states and consequently truculent actions lead to chaos in its own backyard.

Unlike previous Western colonial powers, China's development is founded on peaceful trading even with advanced states like Britain and the US, rather than colonial aggression. Accordingly, China is cognizant that development for others, even powerful states with differing ideologies to its own, can be beneficial.

However, China, having been colonized from the sea and now surrounded on the "first island chain" by US bases, is only too aware that it must seek a strategy to counter de-developmental bids by naval hegemony.

Subsequently, the BRI for China, which creates both land and sea trade routes that are independent of US control, is a hedge against a US approach which seeks to prevent China's growth and maintain the current order of uneven global development.

This sentiment, of resisting uneven development, enjoys democratic support from the global community. Currently, 138 states, largely from the South, have signed up to the BRI. In addition, states in Eastern Europe and Italy have also joined.

The BRI which seeks global development for the entire world contests the very foundations of US naval-hegemony which due to the structural imperatives, aforementioned have left the majority of the earth undeveloped.

Additionally, the levelling of global development, which the BRI strives to introduce, threatens the foundations of capitalism as we know it. This is because private capital can no longer run amok playing non-developed states against developed ones. Instead, it is forced to work, hand in glove, with state power for real development. Thus, capital comes under democratic control.

For the context of China beyond resisting the US, the BRI is also premised on socialist principles set out by **Deng Xiaoping**. He always demanded that China must eventually see even development in its poor east even if that meant, through engagement with Western capitalism, improving China's western seaboard first.

Indeed, the BRI being part of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" and "Xi Jinping Thought" purposely seeks innovative ways to co-opt capital through inter-governmental planning, for the purpose of long-term sustainable development. As such, the BRI transcends short-term profit-seeking motives and many of the BRI projects will not see returns for decades.

The problem then with the BRI, beyond the reported human-rights discourse, is that its development presents a direct contest to an order of uneven-development. It is within this context too that the inexhaustible war in Afghanistan becomes comprehensible beyond just war for war's sake and de-development.

While Afghanistan provides a never-ending excuse for military-industrial complex profiteering it also allows the US to station troops in a country that borders six central Asian states including China. From here the US can aggravate both inland Eurasian development and irritate China.

While the US and its Western allies may believe they have much to lose from global even development, the truth is they only lose their exorbitant privilege of being the sole developed pole which confers them with hegemony. At any rate, the endless wars to maintain this hegemony drain resources, moral and human life.

Overall, for Europe and the USA, BRI provides an opportunity for a better more democratic world where innovation and development come from the whole of humanity.

Europe on the other side of Eurasia, and to the North of Africa, has the opportunity to rejuvenate its old self through new trade routes. Evidently, Eastern European states, who did not rely on sea power for their growth, already understand this better than Western Europe.

The USA, though rich, is lagging behind in basic infrastructure which could be remedied through BRI cooperation. In addition, the US with its technological prowess could easily take a leading position in the BRI and become a driving force in developing “its continent”, as well as the world, rather a driving force for “intervention”.

For the populations in the West divided by infighting over identity politics the recognition that uneven development represents the primary global contradiction has the potential to create unity that transcends divisive ethnic tensions.

For example, the Right seeks to convince us that mass immigration into the West is immoral. Indeed, they have a point, for mass immigration arises from the desperate fleeing poverty and war caused by the current liberal naval-hegemonic order.

A developed multi-polar world, which the BRI seeks to create, would fashion democratic globalization where the movement of people becomes a choice rather than an imperative.

The BRI then is not a neo-imperialist venture. Development is in opposition to the hegemonic tool of uneven development and even development creates the basis for global democracy at home and abroad.

The task now remains to convince the West, for the sake of itself and all of humanity, to transcend the current order that has been inherited from European colonialism. Real democracy and human rights are constructed on solid material foundations rather than on empty discourse that excuses “intervention” which is the greatest human rights abuse.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Keith Lamb](#), Global Research, 2020

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **Keith Lamb**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca