

C.3 From the Chinese SARs to its Silk Roads: Essays

Brief Reflections on Emerging Global Trade Empires: From Trans-Pacific Partnership to “Building Back Better” (B3W) in the Shadow of China's Belt & Road Initiative

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Leadership is measured, in part, by the authority of a person, institution, or state to drive change. Before 2016, it was clear that the United States continued to serve as the vanguard core of leadership (领导核心) for global trade regimes (with the Europeans playing a sort of superego role).² That vanguard position permitted the United States to drive not just the mechanics of trade but its philosophy, principles, and objectives. The great evidence of that vanguard leadership, and the power of its guidance, was nicely evidenced by the U.S. development of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP),³ the final product of the

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² Cf., Robert Kagan, *Paradise and power: America and Europe in the new world order* (Vintage 2004); John Vogler and Hannes R. Stephen, “The European Union in global environmental governance: Leadership in the making?,” *International Environmental Agreements* 7:389-413 (2007)

³ For my take on this effort, see, Larry Catá Backer, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership: Japan, China, the U.S., and the Emerging Shape of a New World Trade Regulatory Order,” *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 13(1):49-81 (2014).

extraordinary post 1945 project of making the world safe from war by integrating the economic lives of all states under principles that focused on diminishing difference and seeking global convergence.⁴ But even then factions within the U.S. were already undermining US leadership not merely through opposition to TPP, but also by opposition to the concept of global trade itself as a source for convergence of global systems in the service of a stable global order.⁵ Both ends of the political spectrum, for their own ends, joined together to seek to impose their own vision of a new world ordering, as well as by a divided business community.⁶ From the right thus was driven by a fear of attacks on sovereign independence, and from the left by a long simmering distrust of markets.⁷ This was a fracturing convergence that was repeated elsewhere among the closest allies of the U.S.⁸

By 2016 US leadership--including its claims to normative leadership--on trade was being challenged from outside by close allies, dependent states, and rising challengers to U.S. domination. The Europeans sought a more internationalist transformation of trade and its closer alignment with human right and sustainability generated through global collective efforts. Developing states sought a greater and more equitable place at the table especially with respect to the division of profit generated up the production chain.⁹ Most potently, China emerged from the disarray of the Soviet led Marxist Leninist camp of the late 1980s as the leadership core of Marxist and post-colonial developing states, a

⁴ See, e.g., Antoni Esteveordal and Alan M. Taylor, "Is the Washington Consensus Dead? Growth, Openness, and the Great Liberalization 1970s-2000s," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 95(5):1669-1690 (2013) ("In the 1990s the so-called Washington Consensus (WC) promoted openness to trade as an essential policy reform to promote growth and higher incomes." Ibid).

⁵ See, e.g., Dani Rodrik, "Goodbye Washington Consensus, Hello Washington Confusion? A Review of the World Bank's "Economic Growth in the 1990s: Learning from a Decade of Reform," *Journal of Economic Literature* 44(4):973-987 (2006). For the U.S. turnaround after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, see, Shaun Narine, "US Domestic Politics and America's Withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership: Implications for Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40(1):50-76 (2018).

⁶ See, e.g., John Ravenhill, "The political economy of the Trans-Pacific Partnership: a '21st Century' trade agreement?," *New Political economy* 22(5):573-594 (2017);

⁷ See, e.g., Christopher M Dent, "Brexit, Trump and trade: Back to a late 19th century future?," *Competition & Change* 24(3-4):338-357 (2020).

⁸ See, e.g., Megumi Naoi and Shujiro Urata, "Free Trade Agreements and Domestic Politics: The Case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement," *Asian Economic Policy Review* 8(2):326-349 (2013).

⁹ See, e.g., Deborah Gleeson, Joel Lexchin, Ruth Lopert, Burcu Kilic, "The Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement, intellectual property and medicines: Differential outcomes for developed and developing countries," *Global Social Policy* 18(1):7-27 (2018). They were also wary of the convergence of global trade as a hegemonic device. For a sample of the thinking, see, Rubrick Biegion, "The United States and Latin America in the Trans-Pacific Partnership: Renewing Hegemony in a Post-Washington Consensus Hemisphere?," *Latin American Perspectives* 44(4):81-98 (2017).

position as uneasily held,¹⁰ as that of the U.S. with respect to its European partners. That leadership of the Marxist Leninist and post-colonial camp gave China a foundation to more muscularly assert a bid for the position of global trade vanguard by offering its own vision of a world trade order (functional and normative). That effort was sparked, in part, by a fundamental rejection of the core normative element of the post 1945 global order--the objective of convergence built around markets and private ordering informed (toward the end) by normative values reflected in international instruments.

By 2021, the tables had been turned.¹¹ That table turning was most visible in the theoretical construction and operationalization of China's Belt & Road Initiative.¹² BRI served as both a theoretical and applied space through which China operationalized its vision of a set of contemporary "Silk Roads" with China at the center, Chinese approaches to global trade, and their underlying normative values, had gained substantial traction. The US, abandoning TPP and its normative framework early in the revolutions of the Trump Administration, responded then in its own crude way with a half-hearted imitation that appeared to emphasize self-interest over collective benefit (the much mocked "America First Project").¹³ The friction could be measured, as well by efforts to mediate difference--especially among those second order states who tend to bear the brunt of both conflict and ideological projects by states driving change.¹⁴

In the process, however, the US also embraced the BRI core premises (and by that embrace rejected those that had framed TPP). And

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion in that context, see, e.g., Yinghong Cheng, "The 'Socialist Other': Cuba in Chinese Ideological Debates Since the 1990s," *The China Quarterly* 209:198-216 (2012); Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam and China: Ideological Bedfellows, Strange Dreamers," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 1-21 (2021); available [https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1932018] ("In the broader world, Vietnam did not jump on China's bandwagon and in many circumstances opted for upholding existing international law and norms against the latter." Ibid., p. 15).

¹¹ See, e.g., Larry Catá Backer, "China," in *Tipping Points in International Law: Commitment and Critique* (John D. Haskell and Jean d'Aspremont (eds), Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 52-73.

¹² See, e.g., Yiping Huang, "Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework, and Assessment," *China Economic Review* 40:314-321 (2016); Matthias Thürera, Ivan Tomašević, Mark Stevenson, Constantin Blomede, Steven Melnyk, Hing Kai Chang, and George Q. Huang, "A systematic review of China's belt and road initiative: implications for global supply chain management," *International Journal of Production Research* 58(8):2436-2453 (2020); Poshan Yu, Zuozhang Chen, and Yingzi Hu, "The Impact of Belt and Road Initiative on Regional Financial Integration – Empirical Evidence from Bond and Money Markets in Belt and Road Countries," *Chinese Economy* 54(4):286-308 (2021).

¹³ Cf., "Farewell to 'America First'? Trade Policy under Joe Biden," BDI (16 June 2021); available [https://english.bdi.eu/article/news/farewell-to-america-first-trade-policy-under-joe-biden/].

¹⁴ See, e.g., Wing Thye Woo, "Integration can keep the Region Above the US-China Fret," *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 8(1):15-16 (2016);

by 2021, the Biden Administration and its allies now sought to regain its vanguard position by imitating (with liberal democratic elements) the framework and sensibilities of the Chinese approach to trade and its structuring in the form of the “Build Back Better for the World (B3W) Partnership.”¹⁵ The US and its vanguards, it seems, were working their way toward a TPP conceptual system with BRI characteristics.¹⁶ B3W represents not merely a liberal democratic alternative to the Belt & Road Initiative, but as well the transposition of the imaginaries of rebuilding from an internally disastrous event and in the process getting closer to the ideal of the pre-disaster imaginary now sought to be recaptured and surpassed.¹⁷

That embrace has been accomplished in small steps over the last year or so. “B3W” appears to be the new form of two previous initiatives led by the American government, the United States Innovation and Competition Act (USICA) and the Blue Dot initiative,”¹⁸ but its full adoption was at last announced with great fanfare during the July 2021 meeting of the G7 when the Biden Administration announced the liberal democratic camp's own Belt and Road Initiative (lite) in the form of the B3W project.

President Biden and G7 partners agreed to launch the bold new global infrastructure initiative Build Back Better World (B3W), a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by major democracies to help narrow the \$40+ trillion infrastructure need in the developing world, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through B3W, the G7 and other like-minded partners will coordinate in mobilizing private-sector capital in four areas of focus—climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality—with catalytic investments from our respective development finance institutions. * * *

¹⁵ The White House, Briefing Room “FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership” (12 June 2021 (Statements and Releases); available [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/].

¹⁶ Zhiquan Zhu, “Countering China with Chinese strategies,” *Voices from the Hill* (17 August 2021); available [https://www.norwich.edu/news/voices-from-the-hill/peace-and-war/3302-countering-china-with-chinese-strategies].; Haris Bilal Malik, “US B3W: A new level of strategic competition with China?,” *Global Village Space* (9 July 2021); available [https://www.globalvillagespace.com/us-b3w-a-new-level-of-strategic-competition-with-china/].

¹⁷ For a discussion of the origins and semiotics of “build back better” and its transposition from the field of disaster recovery to politics, see Larry Catá Backer and Matthew McQuilla, “Introduction: Rationalizing the Chinese Heartland; China and its Autonomous Regions; China in Africa; Essays on Contemporary China and Chinese Imaginary,” *infra* this issue Part A, text and notes 12-20.

¹⁸ Adeela Naureen and Umar Waqar, “B3W vs China: why is India so jumpy?,” *The Express Tribune* (29 June 2021); available [https://tribune.com.pk/story/2307786/b3w-vs-china-why-is-india-so-jumpy].

In announcing this partnership, the United States and its G7 partners are expressing a unified vision for global infrastructure development. As a lead partner in B3W, the United States will seek to mobilize the full potential of our development finance tools, including the Development Finance Corporation, USAID, EXIM, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, and complementary bodies such as the Transaction Advisory Fund. In doing so, the Biden Administration aims to complement domestic infrastructure investments in the American Jobs Plan and create new opportunities to demonstrate U.S. competitiveness abroad and create jobs at home.¹⁹

But the reversal in terms of driving forces is clear. It is China that now appears to provide the trade template; and it is the US that appears to seek to bend it to its own normative tastes.²⁰ In the process, the leading role of the US, one that it has enjoyed since 1945 (however much contested from time to time) is probably as threatened as is the status of the US as a major and driving trade force.²¹ The B3W program is essentially both reactive and reactionary. It seeks to catch up and to rebuild back to past glories that will never be recaptured. It presupposes that the US can travel back in time to recapture a moment that has come and gone and to take advantage of a strategic opportunity squandered as little people played politics around presidential elections and sought to satisfy leadership egos. That is impossible. Yet it is still possible to leap forward; even within the structures of the still horribly labelled B3W. But that may require more than the statements that together form B3W.

These are moral empires, the moral systems of which are expressed in the structures and habits and expectations around which economic activity is organized. But more than that, it is moral in the sense of bending the core principles for collective organization around a basic principle--in both cases now equitable collective prosperity overseen by the administrative apparatus of the state (which serves as the core organizing unit and the center of accountability for contributions to this collective project. The difference is the path, but the vanguard elements of the major imperial camps are all now committed to the

¹⁹ The White House, Briefing Room "FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership" (12 June 2021 (Statements and Releases), *supra*).

²⁰ For a useful approach to understanding the similarities and differences, see, e.g., Hope Wilkinson, "Explainer: B3W vs BRI in Latin America," AS/COA (Americas Society/Council of the Americas (14 December 2021); available [https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-b3w-vs-bri-latin-america].

²¹ Indeed, elements of the Global South tend to see it this way. See, e.g., Adeela Naureen and Umar Waqar, "B3W vs China: why is India so jumpy?," *supra*. ("Unlike the new world order crafted after World War II, western countries may have lost the appetite to jump into another cold war. Italy joined the BRI in 2019, and could find her hands tight. The G-7 are some of the most indebted countries in the world.").

normative principle of collective benefit overseen by the state, but with significant differences in the ecologies of sub principles around which societal, cultural, and economic expectations are built .

The *Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué*²² is built on these moral principles applied to the current challenges. The underlying theme was to recover quickly from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and, borrowing the phrase from Joe Biden's political campaign for the U.S. Presidency, to "build back better."²³ The program of action was built around "shared beliefs and shared responsibilities" that produce prosperity and stability.²⁴ The key to the G7 program is the embrace of liberal democratic values as the foundation of the system they will lead. "We will harness the power of democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights to answer the biggest questions and overcome the greatest challenges."²⁵ On that basis, the G7 will build a united front to (1) end the pandemic (through programs of vaccination); (2) reinvigorate the economies (with large infusions of cash); (3) secure prosperity; (4) protect the planet; and (5) strengthen partnerships.²⁶ This is to be undertaken by "championing freer, fairer trade within a reformed trading system, a more resilient global economy, and a fairer global tax system that reverses the race to the bottom."²⁷ It also touches on a "change in our approach to investment for infrastructure, including through an initiative for clean and green growth."²⁸

What is extraordinary, though is the way that is discursive style now mirrors that coming from the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party. Convergence of sorts is still on the table, but discursively, at least, for the moment its style appears to be that of a Leninist vanguard collective. The alignment is readily apparent, at least discursively, when the Carbis Bay G7 2021 is considered alongside a synopsis of Xi Jinping's speech delivered for the APEC meeting 16 July 2021.²⁹ In that speech, Xi Jinping also noted the core importance of values. These, too, ought to be used to meeting the challenge of the pandemic.³⁰

²² The White House Briefing Room, Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué (13 June 2021); available [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communication/]. (Here after "Carbis Bay G7 2021").

²³ Carbis Bay 2021, supra. See, e.g., Richard Johnson, "Joe Biden's Rooseveltian Ambitions," Political Insight (December 2021). The phrase "build back better" has been used in other contexts as well all over the world.

²⁴ Carbis Bay 2021, supra.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 习近平出席亚太经合组织领导人非正式会议并发表讲话 2021年07月16日 20:29 来源: 新华社 (Xi Jinping Attends and Delivers a Speech at the APEC Leaders' Informal Meeting, July 16, 2021 20:29 Source: Xinhua News Agency); available [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-07/16/c_1628023773641445.htm].

³⁰ Ibid. ("中方愿积极参与保障疫苗供应链稳定安全、促进关键物资流通等合作倡议, 采取有效措施确保人员健康安全有序往来" China is willing to actively participate in cooperation initiatives such as ensuring the stability and safety of

But in this version that effort focuses on developing and protecting the COVID-19 related supply chains. Along with the provision of Chinese vaccines. Second, he expressed the need for regional integration built around the World Trade System. Third he also focused on advancing sustainability agendas and green growth, but here based on technological regional cooperation. Lastly, Xi emphasized the centrality of technological innovation, promising to “hold seminars on digital capacity building and promote cooperation initiatives such as digital technology for tourism recovery.”³¹ All of this was offered under the values aegis of the Chinese system the track record of which was its own recommendation--a value based system with its hub not in the core of the G7 but in Beijing and not under the imaginaries of liberal democracy but that of Chinese socialism.³²

The result points to both the cultivation of difference and the convergence of style. It points to the end of the great striving toward a unitary system of shared values and the beginning of robust moral-economic systems that stress their internal unity and their external difference from others. It points, at last, to systems of barriers and of open spaces--barriers between economic-moral systems whose interaction will be heavily controlled; and open spaces within those systems where the convergence of its members is understood as a high ideal and a robust objective. These are systems quite solid in their cores and quite fluid at their peripheries. They are systems in which second and third order dependencies acquire a measure of autonomy but at the political level but as a consequence of which their states are divided internally by chains of production controlled by one or the other imperial center. These, then, are systems, in which territorial maps of the political have little relevance to the mapping of the territories of economic control on the basis of which the post global imperial order is based.

the vaccine supply chain and promoting the circulation of key materials, and take effective measures to ensure the health, safety and orderly exchange of personnel.

³¹ Ibid. (“中方将举办数字能力建设研讨会，推进数字技术助力旅游复苏等合作倡议”)

³² Ibid. (“习近平强调，中国已经开启全面建设社会主义现代化国家新征程，将建设更高水平开放型经济新体制，创造更具吸引力的营商环境，推进高质量共建“一带一路”，同世界和亚太各国实现更高水平的互利共赢。” [Xi Jinping emphasized that China has embarked on a new journey of building a socialist modern country in an all-round way. It will build a new higher-level open economic system, create a more attractive business environment, and promote high-quality co-construction of the “Belt and Road”, sharing the world and the Asia-Pacific. Countries achieve a higher level of mutual benefit and win-win results])

These were among several questions that were posed to me during the course of a recent interview,³³ the responses to which follow below.³⁴

1-PY: China has achieved great economic development without following the model that liberalism offers. As a major rival for the West liberal democracy models, it seems that the US is trying to drag China into some geopolitical tensions like in Taiwan, Afghanistan and the Middle East in order to hamper Beijing's ambitions. What do you think of this?

LCB: This is a very interesting and subtle question; but it is a question without a clear cut answer. The ambiguity--an ambiguity that tends to produce exasperation among those actors seeking clarity--is produced by the increasingly incompatible ways in which the vanguards in the United States and in China see the world. Those differences, then, and their advantages to the political and economic projects of both rising imperial systems, are then tested at the borderlands of these empires and within first, second and third order dependencies of the new post global and post territorial imperial models. Put simply, both the United States and China have now become heavily invested in the construction of hub and spoke systems for the management of economic production that serves the center but provides benefits as well to along its spokes. The framework of this model blends echoes of ancient tributary systems along with the homogenizing mechanisms of technology fueled consumption. But it is built not merely on the transactional character of tribute but on highly networked systems of managerial embedding pulsating out from the hub through its spokes. The framework requires the replication of core-collective relationships along vertically arranged systems of authority and influence the responsibilities and obligations of which are cemented by dependency. This is not merely an effort to apply the dependency theory cultivated by Marxist thinkers in the developed states and developing world to current conditions.³⁵ Nor does it suggest a reinvented medieval

³³ Interview: "Liberal democracy would have to conform itself to new facts," Mehr News Agency (20 July 2021) (Interview by Payman Yazdani). Available [<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/176338/Liberal-democracy-would-have-to-conform-itself-to-new-facts>].

³⁴ The interview has been lightly edited and includes a small number of footnotes.

³⁵ Cf., Motolani Agbebi "Dependency Theory – A Conceptual Lens to Understand China's Presence in Africa?," *Forum for Development Studies* 44(3):429-451 (2017) (arguing that inter-dependency rather than dependency arrangements characterize emerging African state Chinese relations); Adeni Alfaro Rubio, "The Diffusion and Circulation of Marxism in the Periphery: Mariátegui and Dependency Theory," *Latin American Perspectives* 20(30):1-17 (2021); Cristóbal Kay, "Theotonio Dos Santos (1936-2018): The Revolutionary Intellectual Who Pioneered Dependency Theory," *Development and Change Forum* 2020 51(2):599-630 (2020).

tributary system, the constitution and reconstitution of which has been a contentious concept.³⁶

One speaks here, instead, of a networked system of transactional alignment, the power relationships of which are vertically arranged around the objects and cultures of production. This effectively *transforms the production or supply chain from a purely economic set of dependency relationships founded on contract or ownership principles to a collection of political, economic, and social-cultural relationships* which tie the downstream (dependent) collectives to the upstream leadership cores.³⁷ But it also broadens the concept of production from the purely economic sphere, to the production of the imaginaries that bind people into groups, and groups into collectives. This building project is being undertaken outside of and with only a loose reference to the mass political discourse that is created for consumption by those who are the objects of these ambitions but who have a very limited role to play in its organization or operation beyond the ceremonials of participation in the respective core political practices of these distinct systems--elections in liberal democratic systems and participatory democratic engagement guided by the vanguard in Marxist Leninist systems.

The “new era” which is reflected in this move toward the reconstitution of empire in new forms. These re-constituted imperial models, built without the unnecessary and now distracting characteristics of its ancient forms or more recently its organization along easily policed boundaries (race, religion, territorial control, and the like decisively rejected almost universally since 1945), *share a common objective of sharpening and distilling difference*. That is, the move after 1945 focused on the construction of political-economic models that had as a core objective the diminution of difference and the drive toward systemic convergence at every level of human organization. The object, effectively, was to de-nature difference so that they could be reduced to no more than gestures and affectations without real consequence. The apotheosis of this trajectory in the post 1945 era was nicely framed by the adoption of the official motto of the European Union-- *In varietate concordia* (“toward unity in diversity”--with overtones of harmony and difference and a progression toward this ideal). It was differentiated from the older conception, not of a trajectory

³⁶ Yuan-kang Wang, “The Strange Journey of the Tributary System,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 1-11 (2021). But see, Yuen Fong Khong, “The American Tributary System,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6:1-47 (2013).

³⁷ Cf., Chun Yang, “From Strategic Coupling to Recoupling and Decoupling: Restructuring Global Production Networks and Regional Evolution in China,” *European Planning Studies* 21(7):1046-1063 (2012).

toward convergence in diversity but of the creation of something new from admixture of many different parts, *e pluribus unum* ("out of many one").

That movement away from *e pluribus unum* to *in varietate concordia* remains the official high ideal of political collectives and the foundation of the post 1945 international global order--an underlying convergence with surface differences that remain robust only as a function of the underlying unity that binds them all together. That binding was to be constructed from the elimination of solid borders in favor of convergence through a free mixing of goods, investment, capital, people, cultures and the like--a converging singular diverse world. And it was reflected in the trajectories of law, regulation, and the construction of transnational institutions from the end of the 20th century.³⁸

And yet especially since 2016 it has become almost unavoidable to recognize that the move toward the de-naturing of difference has been reversed in one critical respect: the contest for the authority to impose meaning on difference from out of which harmony may be possible, and to identify those differences that strike at the heart of the project of amalgamating differences within a harmonious collective.³⁹ That sharpening of meaning construction (ideological premises and ways of understanding and responding to the world) and the recognition that with respect to some difference-diversity there can be no convergence, compromise, or de-naturing.⁴⁰

One sees this in the tensions in Hong Kong. There the effect of the protests produced a sharpening of the differences between patriotic individuals and others who must be excised from the collective until they can be rectified. One sees it as well in the great cultural revolutions in the United States undertaken under the banners of social justice, equality and the like which includes as a core proposition the necessity of identifying and excising those national elements (and their way of understanding the world and society) that is reconstituted as a threat to the desired political-social order.

The somewhat long and complicated introduction is necessary in order to understand the character of the conflicts

³⁸ Cf., Larry Catá Backer, "The Structural Characteristics of Global Law for the 21st Century: Fracture, Fluidity, Permeability, and Polycentricity," *Tilburg Law Review* 17:177-199 (2012); available [https://www.backerinlaw.com/Site/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/TILR_017_02_Backertart05.pdf].

³⁹ Cf., Michael A. Witt, Peter Ping Li, Liisa Välikangas and Arie Y. Lewin, "De-globalization and Decoupling: Game Changing Consequences?," *Management and Organization Review* 17(1):6-15 (2021).

⁴⁰ Cf., Jon Benedict, "The Great Decoupling," *Foreign Policy* (14 May 2020); available [<http://acdc2007.free.fr/greatdecoupling620.pdf>].

at the heart of the question in a way that may be more useful than that usually offered for consumption for the masses (and necessarily so to ensure appropriate socialization within each of these chains of power and dependency). This is by no means meant as a judgment or criticism of these trajectories of potentially revolutionary changes--rather it undertaken strictly as a necessary step for clarity in evaluating the expressions of these broader and critical movements as they manifest themselves along the peripheries of first order power. Of course this view is iconoclastic; the great majority of intellectual collectives continue to adhere to traditional theories--they have a lot invested in the past and can see the future only as and to the extent it can be made to fit into their assumptions of the way the world ought to be. Yet that is hardly a useful means of analysis. On the other hand it does serve a valuable purpose in maintaining appropriate attitudes and conditions of meaning for those who are managed within these systems.

And so the short answer to the question: under contemporary conditions it is fundamentally important for the amalgamation of ideology, power and production that are constituted as China and the United States to hamper each other's ambitions. That hampering is undertaken to evidence the superiority of the ideological system of the victory in this battles on the peripheries of empire. They also realign the borders of those empires. Moreover, they provide the information necessary for each to quantify (in terms of prosperity, order and the benefits of values to collective well-being as defined and measured by each) both the differences between them and to sell the superiority of each to their respective collectives. Lastly they serve as a means of developing the operating or working styles of each imperial model and to monitor and discipline their respective dependencies ordered in terms of their alignments and values to the imperial cores.

That, at last, is what one is confronted with when one considers the tensions that explode on the borderlands of the emerging empires. Those tensions can implicate the imperial core directly (especially when claimed core territories appear to be in play--Taiwan and Hong Kong. Or they can also be manifested in the way in which first or second order dependencies may be managed, lost or won. In those cases the conflict appears to be driven by the sub-imperial objectives of powerful dependencies (traditionally regional powers in the old language of international politics), but which ultimately are framed carefully to align with the objectives and desires of the imperial core. Afghanistan provides a case in point. On the one hand one can view it as an American defeat and a great victory for China--if that victory is understood as empowering the

Chinese economic apparatus to complete its focus on encircling India (an affiliated regional power aligned with the United States or perhaps better said against China) and building its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure grid to connect China to the ports of Pakistan. In this reading, the American abandonment of Afghanistan also significantly detaches the United States from Pakistan, and creates in both a second and third order dependency relationship with China. But at the same time, this shifting of borders might advantage the United States as well in the sense of strengthening its own product chains now through India and Southeast Asia and resetting the relationships in ways to restore the United States to a position of control but control actualized through others.

The Middle East presents a more complicated scenario for both China and the United States. Here the risks for both are greater because the regional powers can act with a greater measure of autonomy--enough autonomy to sometimes force the hand of the superior (but far away) power centers. In this context the ambitions of both Beijing and Washington will likely be hampered by the criss-crossing and constantly rebalanced calculations of the major players in the region, spiced by the interests of second order imperial systems--in this case the Russians and the Europeans. But again, rethinking strategies from the framework of imperial hub-and-spoke models, driven by control of production (first) and markets (second), and sold by the measurable benefits of the application of competing ideologies, access rather than control might become the key variable. With that there may be a greater tolerance for inter-regional contests (as long as they do not threaten production chains). The last wrinkle can be sorted out indirectly through an ancient method once developed exquisitely by the Romans (and to some extent by the Ottomans but on a smaller scale) and the Chinese imperial apparatus--*the taking of hostages* from the leading clans of regional powers (first order dependencies) as well as the direction of investment into the imperial centers (e.g., Middle East investment in Europe and the US). In that case individuals can be socialized during their residency and national investment imposes a huge costs on separation.

2- PY: *The recent G7 summit allocated billions of dollars to challenge China's One Road One Belt project. Will western countries be able to contain China?*

LCB: This is an excellent question especially as it highlights another key development since 2013--the *convergence of the operating style* of the two key power players on the world stage today. The "containment" game actually started in its modern form after the great financial crisis of

2007. At the time, though, the idea wasn't containment. What became containment strategies were initially constructed in the service of the post 1945 vision of reducing difference and forging convergence through compromise, but all with fidelity to the great core values of the post 1945 system--separation of public (regulatory) and private (commercial and markets driven) activities; a level playing field for market participants; markets driving economic activity; and an ILO approach to labor-capital issues, among the more important. *It was convergence* that drove the Obama administration to ramp up US participation in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), and to engage in a series of secret but not really very secret meetings the purpose of which was to draw China into the arrangement. The carrot was greater access to a huge market and a deeper embedding with global trajectories; the stick was exclusion from this zone and the likelihood that the normative principles that drove it would not include principles and compromises important to China (especially with respect to Chinese approaches to economic planning, the role of the state in private activity. China chose difference over unity (or from their perspective, the US chose to use TPP as a back door to challenging core Marxist-Leninist principles of state-economic relationships that could not be given up without compromising the legitimacy of that system). So what started out as a means of bringing powers closer together actually and eventually contributed to the sharpening of difference.

It was in part to meet the threat that exclusion from TPP posed that the Chinese central authorities developed the Belt & Road Initiative in the way they did. Exclusion produced the rhetoric of containment--a rhetoric that was historically appealing and had substantial "selling power" among the potential market for Chinese economic ambitions among developing states with their own tangled histories with the West. Of course, there is much there that constitutes merely the globalization of the great Chinese project of Reform and Opening Up. I use the word "merely" not to diminish the great leap that loved internal working styles developing China outward. The genius of the concept permitted the Chinese central authorities to align internal development of Marxism-Leninism centered on Chinese development with its expression as a means of aligning Chinese with foreign development under the guidance and leadership of the Chinese vanguard. Again here BRI replicated the core-collective organizational foundation of emerging Chinese Leninism with both an implementation strategy that put China at the center and that permitted that center to align internal and external development in a seamless way. It was thus appealing to developing states as a political, economic, and societal model even as it served to project outward Chinese economic objectives in ways that aligned with their political-economic

model and could in that form challenge what was viewed as the counterthrust represented by TPP and to create a barrier to the projection of Liberal democratic principles into China. At the same time it also provided an extraordinary opportunity to mimic liberal democratic markets driven internationalism with a new and potentially more appealing to developing states communist internationalism. The temptations, given the threats (and the sense among Chinese elites that China would eventually eclipse the US in terms of economic power (and perhaps moral authority) were irresistible. And the opportunities to merely internationalize Chinese internal practices outbound made the project that much easier.

And here, irony. China's BRI changed the rules of the game precisely because China viewed TPP as a threat to the development of its own autonomous path to prosperity and stability grounded in the imperatives of Marxist Leninist principles and objectives. It represents the first real effective effort to contain liberal democratic globalist internationalism and the great post 1945 project of alignment under the unity or harmony in diversity mandate through which all difference would be minimized within the great organizational principles of markets driven internationalism founded on the normative construct of UN internationalism. Thus, from a longer term perspective the Chinese BRI represents the first of the post-global strategies of (1) containment; and (2) supplanting. The supplanting element was made clear early on as well-- China offered its BRI approach as a direct global internationalist alternative to that in place since 1945 and driven by the great liberal democratic powers. Further, in this light, one can measure the success of this effort in two ways. The first measure is as a function of the *collapse of the supremacy of the principle of alignment and convergence* at the ideological heart of the post 1945 system, one that was framed and legitimated by the triumph of the liberal democratic camp against the last of the old fashioned empires--that of the Soviet Union and antique Marxist-Leninism in the late 1980s. The second measure is as a function of the reaction of the liberal democratic states to the sudden and quite aggressive rise of the BRI system--a rise powerful enough (like the Mongol invasions of the 13th century) to reach into the heart of Europe itself.

Using that approach as a conceptual lenses, the question then becomes not whether the liberal democratic camp can contain China, but whether the West's efforts to mimic what is the Chinese post-global vision for a system of competing imperial orders each managing its complex webs of dependencies and fighting along the edges of their borders in the form of the G7 declaration of a liberal Democratic version of the BRI, can effectively avoid the containment of the liberal democratic camp by China. The reactionary element of the liberal democratic project is contained even in its name--the

“Building Back Better” (B3W) project, but in effect the project aims to abandon the fundamental ordering principles of the great post 1945 globalist internationalist project.

And, of course, the still greater irony, what the liberal democratic order is effectively copying is a version of China’s copying of the TPP--which had been abandoned by the United States in 2017. For this the United States has only itself to blame--from the phlegmatic response of the late Obama administration (miscalculating because of its presumption of a victory by Mrs. Clinton who would have been tasked with dealing with TPP and the misguided opposition to its vision by left and right edges of the influence driving elites); the visceral opposition by Mr. Trump who saw in this a low cost gesture which he could use to feed his followers; and the absolute blindness of the American political class and their intellectual servants who were so caught up in themselves and their own vision of thing that they failed almost entirely to appreciate what was going on outside of their self-absorbed and limited frames of reference. Now of course the nation pays the price. Yet in that is also a lesson for the Chinese central authorities as well as the leading groups of global regional powers.

And that leads to, and makes possible, *very short answers* to the question posed: (1) Neither China nor the United States will be able to contain the other (2) the object of all this maneuvering is centered on the extension and control of production chains to advance the interests of the central authority (Washington and Beijing--and to a lesser extent the EU, though even China understands the EU’s odd but not quite primary position in the new imperial ordering of global production and with it of global affairs); (3) it was inevitable that the liberal democratic camp, under the guidance and leadership of the United States, would have to conform itself to the new realities, effectively abandon a core policy grounded in the convergence of difference to one in which the heart of strategic competition requires the sharpening of differences at the border of ideological and production empires; (4) the billions that will be spent must be spent, starting with an infrastructure improvement project in the American metropolis (again an irony the Biden Administration actually seeing implemented the infrastructure plan first floated by the Trump Administration and rejected by Democrats before 2020); (5) infrastructure will have strategic implications well beyond reducing the costs of trade and production by providing a physical manifestation of production chain connection, by creating distinct techno-corridors that will be difficult to abandon making moving from BRI to its American version harder, by ensuring the robust protection of resource and production corridors, and by ensuring an alignment between the projection of military and economic power. The left wing of the United States used to mock its government for that

alignment when it was reduced to support for certain states in the Middle East; they whistle a different tune when it is to the provision of their creature comforts and the expansion of their investment portfolios that this projection protects; and (6) development of robust B3W principles and practices (TPP 2.0, will provide a necessary apparatus through which trade between empires can be properly managed--the resulting regime from this policy of mutual containment, then posits free trade within the imperial production corridors, and strictly managed trade between the two blocs.

3-PY: How do you assess the recent developments in Afghanistan that may also spill over to Central Asia in hindering China's economic development?

LCB: The religious issue will at some point have to be confronted. But it is likely that many states will take the longer view on that question. The reason is simple and straightforward--there is little space for maneuvering when one political collective is in either a state of dependence or of weakness relative to another. China is calling the shots here, for the most part. The *dar al Islam* is reacting and responding strategically. In the process is also reinventing a legitimating framework for managing minority peoples, practices, beliefs, and the like. This is a quite different version of unity from diversity recalling an earlier time. But it also reflects the trajectories of the time, discussed in response to an earlier question in which it was posited that is this an age in which difference is sharpened and beyond a tolerable point, difference is viewed as a threat to the social and political order and on that basis suppressed. That same principle has been applied in the context of Hong Kong; it has been applied within the context of defining the limits of legitimate political expression in the US (the exclusion of former President Trump from social media outlets is a case in point that ought not to be minimized in its importance in that regard and it is now applied to issues of religion.

The reason I start my answer with that point is that China will play a critical role in the development of the situation in Afghanistan in particular and in central Asia in general.⁴¹ But

⁴¹ Indeed, the extent of its possibilities in filling the space abandoned by the U.S. and its allies, who have also been unable to resolve the great religious contradiction that is Afghanistan and which is in part merely a reflection of the religious contradiction of American political culture --was evidenced by recent measures undertaken by Chinese central authorities to rationalize the exploitation by its own companies of Afghanistan's mineral resources. "China warns its companies to get permits before 'blindly' visiting Afghanistan for minerals," CNBC (16 December 2021); available <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/17/china-warns-its-companies-to-get-permits-before-blindly-visiting-afghanistan-for-minerals.html>

here there are complications. The *dar al Islam* in remote areas of Central Asia remains difficult to for foreigners manage.⁴² Russia and Iran also have strategic and ancient spheres of influence and prerogatives in the region--especially where the modern names of the regions are stripped away to reveal the ethno-territories that have been parts of both ancient empires off and on for many centuries. Moreover, the instability in that country will produce ethno-migrations to bordering states that itself may add to instability.

And yet Afghanistan remains a third order dependency, at best. As mentioned as part of the answer to an earlier question, China will likely work through Pakistan rather than directly in in Afghanistan. And it is just as well. The Afghanistan government in waiting, the merging of the religious establishment of the Taliban with the apparatus of state, has very little love for China and Chinese policy. And in any case, as with the US and Europeans once there, can view the Chinese either as rich foreigners worthy of kidnap and ransom or invaders who may be killed with impunity.

All of this is speculation of course, yet Afghanistan has never disappointed in its strong adherence to traditions of dealing with foreigners. The most interesting potential consequences will revolve around the use by the new government of Chinese infrastructure as a hostage form which to exact payment (reverse tribute for good behavior); the willingness of the Afghanistan government to allow itself to be used as a proxy for Kazakhstan in penetrating the Xinjiang region for the purpose of subverting the policies of the central authorities, and the irritation with which neighboring states and the retreating liberal democratic states will view the continuous production of opium and related goods as (now recharacterized) acts of markets based terrorism for the purpose of destabilization. More exquisite and provocative would be the willingness of the regime to support penetration of these markets into China itself.

Beyond that, the Americans never had the will or the creativity, to use Afghanistan to greater effect. The issue of mission chaos (the leadership never really settling on a purpose to the American presence other than as punishment and regime change and then as guardians of halfhearted efforts to change the fundamental culture of a fundamentalist society). That is the great lesson for the US--again. And in any case Iraq became a disastrous distraction early in the engagement with Afghanistan. China, in its own way, will face the same dilemma.

⁴² Ibid. ("“Currently there have been many incidents of foreign citizens being detained without permits in various parts of Afghanistan,” it said in a statement on its website.”).

But unlike the United States, that has very little to lose by cutting ties, China now has a great deal to lose especially in the construction and maintenance of the physical manifestation of its hub and spoke model of economic management of its global production and consumption chains. From the American perspective the result is a cost effective means of hobbling BRI and indirectly punishing both Afghanistan and Pakistan for their less than enthusiastic loyalty. In that case, the cultivation of instability and the directed sharpening of difference can undermine the stability essential to the smooth operation of this part of the Chinese silk road. To the extent that China responds militarily, it will assume the same risks and incur the costs already well documented in earlier similar scenarios.

4-PY: Do the US and its allies enjoy enough tools and potentials to contain Beijing? Will China finally succeed in determining the world trade order?

LCB: Much of what has been said before can be applied to answer this question. The simplest answer is direct: (1) The liberal democratic order under the leadership of the United States still has more than enough tools to prevent China from substituting its own world trade order for that of the liberal democratic camp; (2) but in the effort to prevent such a reversal of global authority, two things occur that perversely enough help reshape the world trade order itself, the first is that the principle object is to sharpen difference rather than promote convergence across difference, and the second is that in the absence of a singular vision for a world trading order, global trade will be unified only by and as a series of rules under which trade may pass from one universalist (and closed) system to another. In addition, the actual character of what emerges will be dependent, to a large extent, on the strength of the willingness of the leadership of both states to undertake the necessary measures to advance their interests in this new era. It is not clear that in a context in which the character of national will is itself in a state of flux that either will be able to push the boundaries to their limits.

That is the future. The contours of these transformations we are already seeing. The evidence is plain: First the efforts to ensure that data and information is confined within the borders of the state from which it is sourced. Second, the increasing use of waivers from free trade on grounds of national security and national interest. Third, the heightened wariness of espionage. Fourth the development of institutional countermeasures to the use of economic power and markets and a site for non-violent warfare between competing camps. The world order built on the fundamental principle of convergence is now irremediably broken. What emerges is not

the old national orders of the first half of the 20th century, but the emergence of a post-global imperial ordering built around hubs that protect free movement of good, investment, capital and to some extent people along the spokes that are connected to the center.⁴³ Between hub zones there is movement, of course--one sees this already in the re-development of U.S.-China trade. China's dual circulation policy is a good example of the emerging forms of thinking that will shape this future.⁴⁴ In both cases there are now gatekeepers at the borderlands that manage inter-hub relationships with greater sensitivity to the integrity of each community.



⁴³ See, e.g., 畅通“双循环” 物流大通道将加速成型 2020-09-02 07:54:00 来源: 经济参考报 (“Unblocked “dual cycle” logistics channel will accelerate the formation,” 2020-09-02 07:54:00 Source: Economic Information Daily); available [http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2020-09/02/c_1126441416.htm].

⁴⁴ Dual circulation emphasizes growth through exports (managed by and through state policy) and a focus on cultivating an autonomous domestic demand (for domestically manufactured goods). See, e.g. Frank Tang, “Explainer |: What is China’s dual circulation economic strategy and why is it important?,” South China Morning Post (19 November 2020); available [<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3110184/what-chinas-dual-circulation-economic-strategy-and-why-it>] (“But despite the increased emphasis on the domestic market and on self-reliance in some sectors, President Xi has said repeatedly that China will not completely close itself off from the outside world, and will instead open up more.” Ibid.. It represents a quite conscious movement away from the Chinese version of global convergence that aligned with that of the liberal democratic West from the 1980s. See,); Kevin Yao, “What We Know About China’s ‘Dual Circulation’ Economic Strategy,” Reuters (15 September 2020); available [<https://www.reuters.com/article/china-economy-transformation-explainer/what-we-know-about-chinas-dual-circulation-economic-strategy-idUSKBN2600B5>] (“Three decades ago, former leader Deng Xiaoping adopted a “great international circulation” strategy, but the 2008-09 global crisis exposed the vulnerability of the export-led model and prodded policymakers to rebalance growth towards domestic demand.”).

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Emerging Global Trade Empires