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RESEARCH TRENDS ON THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) IN JAPAN: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first announced in 2013, is China's long-term global investment strategy which targets infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the historic Silk Road. This initiative is composed of the six land-based economic corridors and a maritime counterpart that runs through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. The land-based corridors are collectively labelled the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB), while its maritime counterpart is called 'the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (MSR).

In March 2015, the official blueprint for the BRI was jointly issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). According to the 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', the BRI is based on five cooperation priorities: 1) policy coordination (promoting inter-governmental cooperation and building a mechanism for policy exchange), 2) facilities connectivity (strengthening infrastructure planning and construction), 3) unimpeded trade (removing investment and trade barriers as well as promoting regional economic integration), 4) financial integration (deepening financial cooperation and promoting financial system development), and 5) people-to-people bonds (cultural and academic exchange) [Guojia Fazhan he Gaige Weiyuanhui 2015].

Regarding the coordination of the initiative, the BRI has no permanent secretariat and its implementation includes multiple stakeholders. The Leading Group for Promoting the Implementation of the BRI (LGPI-BRI)[1], which is under the NDRC, oversees guiding and coordinating work related to the BRI. As of June 2021, the Chair of the LGPI-BRI is Han Zheng, the Senior Vice Premier of the State Council. A recently established China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)[2], a body responsible for strategic guidelines and policies on foreign aid, plays an important role in the implementation of the BRI.

As for the BRI's financial vehicles, it is supported by various institutional mechanisms such as: 1) China's policy banks (the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM)), 2) state-owned commercial banks (the Agricultural Bank of China (ABC), the Bank of China (BOC), the China Construction Bank (CCB), and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC)), 3) state-owned investment funds (e.g. the Silk Road Fund (SRF)), and 4) China-led multilateral development banks (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB)).

The first five years of the BRI were a period of rapid, albeit chaotic, expansion. Despite various criticism, the Chinese government (perhaps deliberately) kept the BRI vaguely defined. President Xi's speech at the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) (25–27 April 2019) was the first serious attempt to recalibrate the BRI. Four priorities stood out at the 2019 Forum: 1) narrowing BRI's scope, 2) strengthening the mechanism of open consultation, 3) promoting clean governance, and 4) greening the Belt and Road Initiative [Xi 2019]. Since the 2nd BRF, the Chinese government has made repeated efforts to improve the governance of the initiative as well as engage with a broader array of stakeholders.

In another development, as a result of COVID-19, a kind of 'slimming down' of the BRI seems to be in the making. It must be noted, however, that although China's outbound lending has slowed to new lows in 2020, most Asian and African countries are desperate to speed up the post-COVID-19 recovery keeping the doors wide open to Chinese investment. The above, in tandem with the expected decline of foreign direct investment (FDI) from the EU, Japan, and the U.S., might yet result in another recalibration and expansion of the BRI [Hutt 2020; Mingey and Kratz 2021].

From the above discussion, it is clear that the BRI is a project still in its early stage, in constant flux and in dire need of a more definitive set of parameters. The vagueness of the initiative makes it not only an easy target for criticism, but also puts the public across Asia, Africa, and Europe on guard and leaves scholars and pundits constantly scrambling to discern what the BRI is from what it is not.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology behind the review and summarises the basic characteristics of the included textual materials. Section 3 discusses the main threads of the debate on the BRI in Japan, with a particular focus on the geopolitical-geoeconomic-geostrategic component of the debate as well as the BRI-related developments in Japan's foreign policy. Section 4 offers a detailed analysis of the BRI's five cooperation priorities-related studies. In Section 5, theoretical and conceptual approaches Japanese scholars apply to study the BRI are outlined. The answer to the review's main research question (that is, 'how is China's BRI portrayed in the Japanese language literature') is given in the conclusion of the paper.

2. METHODOLOGY

The term 'literature review' has come to refer to 'a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners' [Fink 2014: 3]. This article sets out to review Japanese language publications devoted to the BRI.[3] Given the breadth of the topic, it is necessary to clarify two 'technical problems' at the outset: 1) which review type is best suited for a topic that cuts across many disciplines and involves macro-, meso-, and micro-level insights, and 2) which review type is best suited for a topic that has generated a wealth of valuable publications in so-called 'grey literature'.[4]

A traditional literature review (= a narrative review) provides a comprehensive, critical, and objective analysis of the current knowledge on a given topic. It generally involves a simple three-step process of identifying materials for inclusion, synthesising materials in textual, tabular, or graphical form, and analysing their contribution or value (the so-called 'critical component of a review'). The problem with this type of review is that it often fails to apply scientific principles to the process of reviewing, leading to a situation in which unrepresentative samples of studies are analysed 'in an unsystematic and uncritical fashion' [Petticrew and Roberts 2006: 5]. A systematic review, on the other hand, involves identifying, selecting, appraising, and synthesising all high-quality research evidence relevant to a particular research question (or set of questions). Most importantly, a systematic review is based on a review protocol in order that it can be easily replicated if necessary [Bettany-Saltikov 2010: 47–48]. To minimise bias, this review article broadly follows the method of systematic review, to the extent that it formulates a set of research questions and includes a review protocol.

This review starts with a main research question followed by three sub-questions:

[1] How is China's BRI portrayed in the Japanese language literature?

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[1a] What are the main characteristics of the debate on the BRI in Japan?
[1b] How are the BRI's five cooperation priorities portrayed in the Japanese language literature?
[1c] What kind of theoretical and conceptual approaches do scholars apply to study the BRI?

To gain better insight into the included textual materials, Subsection 2.1. summarises their basic characteristics. Section 3, 4, and 5 deal respectively with the aforementioned sub-questions. The answer to the main research question will be given in the conclusion of this paper.

In the following paragraphs, details are included on how the textual materials were located (sourcing), selected (screening), and assessed (critical appraisal). The literature search was conducted using CiNii—a bibliographic database service with academic information on articles (CiNii Articles[5]), books (CiNii Books[6]), and dissertations (CiNii Dissertations[7]) maintained by the National Institute of Informatics. In a bid to avoid excluding grey literature, the CiNii Articles search was supplemented by a search in Zassaku Plus, a non-free database for Japanese magazines and periodicals run by Koseisha Co.[8]

Originally, the intention was to limit the search to Japanese language articles published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. In the process of preliminary screening, however, it became clear that a wealth of valuable publications on infrastructure development, logistics and supply chain, Japan-China third-party market cooperation, as well as a considerable number of meso-level studies have been published outside of peer-review metrics. Given the above, it was decided to carry out a comprehensive literature search that included not only peer-reviewed articles, but also books/book chapters, research paper series and conference proceedings, research articles, research notes, and research reports published by think tanks[9] and business associations.[10] As regards the authorship of the studies, textual materials authored by at least one Japan-based scholar or Japanese think tank-affiliated expert were included.

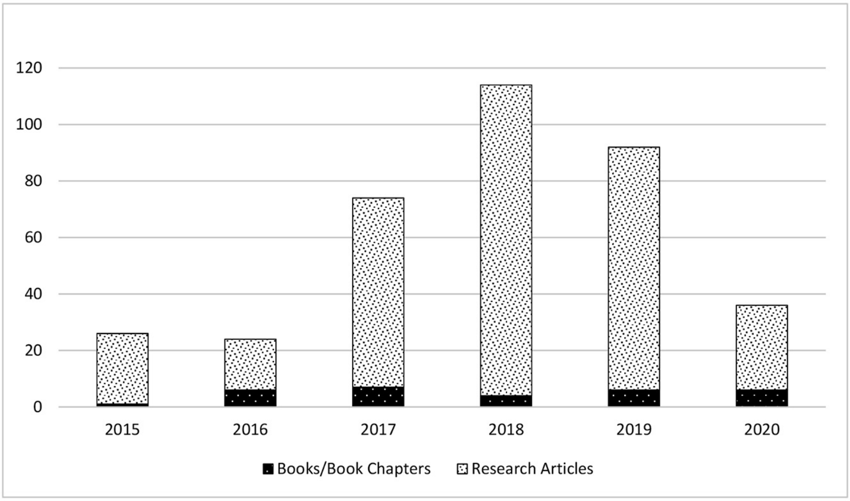
The search was conducted by entering the phrase *Ittai ichiro* 一帯一路 (the Japanese term for both 'One Belt One Road' and 'Belt and Road Initiative'). While the search in CiNii Dissertations returned only 1 result, the search in CiNii Books returned 260 results. At the screening stage, translations from Chinese language sources, Chinese language publications, as well as conspiracy fiction were excluded, leaving 30 books/book chapters and research paper series for further assessment. Regarding CiNii Articles, to keep the results at a reasonable number, the search was restricted to the title and keywords of the studies. A joint CiNii Articles/Zassaku Plus search yielded 521 results. At the screening stage, the abstracts (if available) were screened to further determine the relevancy of the retrieved studies. Once this had been done, publications from weekly magazines, monthly literary and general knowledge magazines, newsletters, translations of foreign language articles, Japanese language articles published abroad, anonymous articles[11], editorials, interviews, panel discussions, and book reviews were excluded, leaving 336 articles for further assessment. The appraisal of the retrieved studies was carried out in tandem with the screening procedure. Before turning to a narrative synthesis of the retrieved studies, Subsection 2.1. sets out their basic characteristics.

2.1. Basic Characteristics

Basic characteristics for the 366 studies included in this review article are summarised in Figure 1, 2, and 3 of this subsection. Figure 1 presents the distribution of the studies by year of publication. Books/book chapters and research paper series retrieved from CiNii Books are categorised as 'Books/ Book Chapters', while research articles, research notes, research reports, special reports, and conference proceedings retrieved from the CiNii Articles/Zassaku Plus are under the 'Research Articles' heading. As can be seen in Figure 1, the research interest in the BRI peaked in 2018 (114 studies) and was second highest in 2019 (92 studies). There are two reasons for this occurrence. First, scholars and experts made attempts to assess the status of the BRI five years on [e.g. Kojima 2019]. Second, 2018 witnessed the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, while 2019 marked 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Understandably, the anniversaries encouraged a wealth of 'critical retrospective' and 'mapping the future' studies, with the BRI featuring prominently in both narratives [e.g. Ehara 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Kondō 2018].

The BRI is a topic that attracts attention from a broad set of scholarly

Figure 1. Distribution of Textual Materials per Year

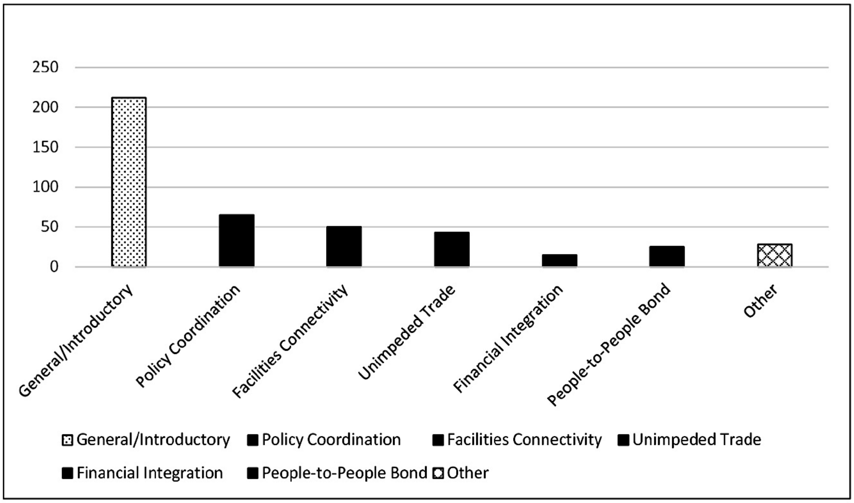


Source: Author's own elaboration.

literature from different academic disciplines, making it inherently difficult to classify. The most obvious classifications include issue-based (= thematic) and geographical approaches. Figure 2 presents the issue-based distribution of the textual materials, grouping them under three headings: 'General/Introductory', 'Five Cooperation Priorities', and 'Other'.[12] The heading 'General/Introductory' is used to refer to studies that offer an overview of the BRI or/and examine its security, economic, and geopolitical/geoeconomic dimension in a global and regional context. These studies are discussed in detail in Section 3 of this paper. The 'Five Cooperation Priorities' category is further subdivided into 'Policy Coordination', 'Facilities Connectivity', 'Unimpeded Trade', 'Financial Integration', and 'People-to-People Bond' sub-categories. The Five Cooperation Priorities-related studies are mapped out in Section 4 of this paper. As seen in Figure 2 below, the General/Introductory articles on the BRI account for almost 49 % of the included materials, while the Five Cooperation Priorities-related articles make up 45 % of the total number.

While the thematic approach offers an issue-based tabulation of data, the geographical approach classifies the BRI-related studies by region. Taking the World Bank's (WB) classification as a starting point, the following regions were included: 1) East Asia and Pacific, 2) Europe and Central Asia, 3) South Asia, 4) Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and 5) Sub-Saharan Africa. As seen in the chart below, the 'BRI and Japan' sub-category, although marked with a different shade, is a part of the 'East

Figure 2. Issue-based Distribution of Textual Materials



Source: Author's own elaboration.

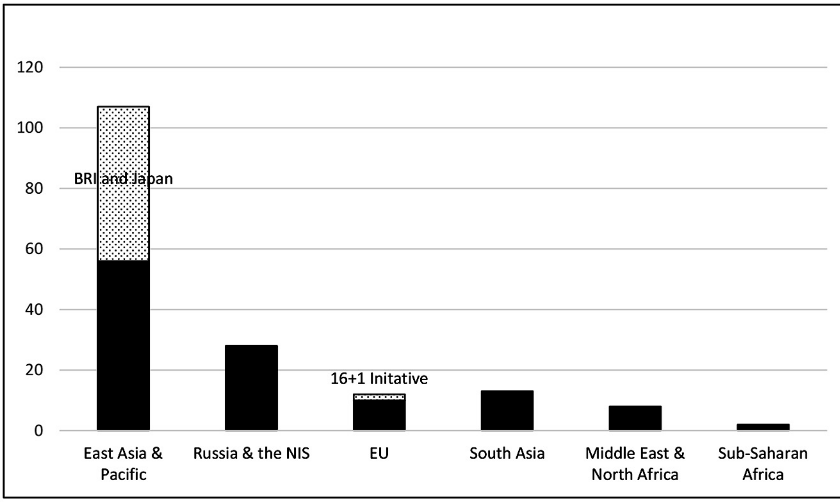
Asia and Pacific' column. The 'BRI and Japan'-related articles are discussed in detail in Subsection 3.1. of this paper.

The division of the European continent into regions for statistical purposes has always been a tricky issue. For this study, the 'Europe and Central Asia' region is further divided into 'Russia and the Newly Independent States (NIS)' and 'the European Union (EU)' categories. However, three caveats need to be clarified. First, the Polar Silk Road-related articles are included in the 'Russia and the NIS' category. Second, although a part of the NIS, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are EU member states and would be treated as such. Third, the 16 + 1 Initiative that aims to intensify and expand cooperation between China and a block of 16 countries in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) includes 11 EU member states and 5 non-EU countries. Hence, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia would be grouped under the 'EU' heading. As seen in the chart below, the 16 + 1 Initiative-related studies, although a part of the 'EU' column, are marked with a different shade.

Overall, as can be seen in Figure 3 below, among 170 studies with a defined geographical scope, 107 articles analyse East Asia-related topics, while 28 articles focus on Russia/the NIS region.[13] Given the centrality of ASEAN and Central Asian countries for the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as Japan's economic, political, and security interests, the above results come as no surprise.

In this section the methodology behind this review has been presented

Figure 3. Distribution of Textual Materials by Region



Source: Author's own elaboration.

and the basic characteristics of the included textual materials have been summarised. In Section 3, the main threads of the debate on the BRI in Japan will be discussed, focusing on the geopolitical/geoeconomic component of the debate and the BRI-related developments in Japan's foreign policy.

3. DEBATING CHINA'S BRI IN JAPAN: SOURCES OF CONCERN AND POSSIBILITIES FOR COOPERATION

The debate over China's BRI has been lively and, at times, heated, both in China and internationally. Views on the BRI among scholars and pundits range from enthusiastic, through pragmatic, to sceptical. The enthusiasts perceive the BRI as a bold and visionary plan to deliver prosperity across the developing world. The initiative, they argue, is a proposal for an open, inclusive, and win-win economic cooperation between China and its partners. Such cooperation is supposed to strengthen the global trading system, promote catch-up and poverty alleviation, and create opportunities for economic growth [e.g. Tian 2017; Liu and Dunford 2016]. The sceptics, on the other hand, present the BRI as China's grab for power: an attempt to create a Eurasian sphere of influence within the America-led global liberal order and a pretext for expanding China's military presence [e.g. Callahan 2016; Rolland 2020]. Lastly, the pragmatists argue that the initiative, opaque as it is, has provided opportunities not only for China but for its partners to reach their respective goals [e.g. Zhao 2019; Chaisse and Matsushita 2018]. In his opinion piece 'For Developing World, Belt and Road Initiative Is Best Deal Around', Saeed aptly observed: 'If Western governments want to offer a serious alternative to the BRI, they will need to significantly scale up development aid budgets and consider loosening up governance and investment standards' [Saeed 2020].

If one had to choose a buzzword for the BRI as presented in academic debate, it certainly would be the triad of 'geopolitics-geoeconomics-geostrategy'.[14] For nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical discourse within academia had been largely marginalised. Since the 2010s, however, following the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia', China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the escalation of the Iran-Saudi rivalry in the Middle East, there has been a new wave of interest in the geopolitical/geoeconomic analysis. It is thus not surprising that the ongoing debate over the BRI has been dominated by geopolitical imagery.

Geoeconomic analysis points to China's attempts to forge a stronger transportation infrastructure as well as trade and investment linkages between China and Europe via New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC). Equally important, to redress development imbalances between its eastern and western regions and to ensure the stability of the latter, China spares no effort to develop infrastructure, promote trade, and enhance interconnectivity between its western regions and neighbouring countries (e.g. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC), etc.). In another important development, China has forged ahead with its plans for the Digital Silk Road (DSR), focusing on two major undertakings: 1) the upgrading of internet connections across the BRI in the form of overland and undersea optic cables, and 2) the expansion of China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System[15] to rival the U.S. government-owned GPS. In sum, the DSR advances China's bid for technological independence at home while positioning it at the centre of a global network.

The BRI is also vital to advance China's geopolitical interests in three aspects: 1) energy security, 2) maritime security, and 3) China's Arctic strategy. According to *International Energy Outlook Report* projections, between 2018 and 2050 most of the growth in electricity generation in China will be fuelled by renewables and natural gas. During the projection period, China's use of natural gas is expected to increase nearly 190 %, reaching 21.7 Tcf[16] by 2050. The electricity generation share of wind and solar, on the other hand, is predicted to grow from 12 % in 2018 to 42 % in 2050, with renewable energy becoming the leading source of primary energy consumption by 2050 [U.S. Energy Information Administration 2019]. It follows that China needs to forge stronger ties with leading natural gas producers (Russia, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan) via China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWAEC). This also explains China's efforts to connect its newly constructed UHVDC transmission network with the grids of neighbouring nations, in order to export the surplus electricity from its wind and solar PV farms.[17]

Regarding maritime security, China's investment in Gwadar Port (Pakistan), Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka), Chittagong Port (Bangladesh), and Kyaukpyu Port (Myanmar) not only allows Beijing to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean, but helps to reduce its dependence on the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea shipping routes. Scholars and pundits agree that a primary objective of Chinese-built infrastructure in South Asia is to provide safe avenues for natural resources to be delivered to China. Connected with a network of dry ports in the Eurasian hinterland, Gwadar Port is expected to play a key role as a gateway for cargo to/from Central Asian countries, China's western regions and Russia [Shibasaki et al. 2019].

Security experts, however, interpret China's efforts to expand its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean as evidence of India's strategic encirclement and draw attention to the potential danger of the militarisation of ports along the MSR. Chinese investments in civilian ports across the Indian Ocean has been dubbed the 'string of pearls' strategy.[18] It is argued that China has established strategic footholds in key locations that may one day be used by China's navy. While the Chinese government has not acknowledged the existence of such a strategy, the 2020 U.S. Department of Defense's *Annual Report to Congress* extensively discusses the Chinese strategy of military-civil fusion, which includes 'leveraging civilian service and logistics capabilities for military purposes' [Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020: vi].

In yet another development, in January 2018, the State Council published a white paper titled *China's Arctic Policy*. The document outlines Chinese development goals in the region (including commercial, resource extraction, scientific, and environmental protection) and aligns China's Arctic strategy with the BRI (the so-called 'Polar Silk Road') [Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi 2018]. China's interest in the Arctic seems to be driven by the potential energy benefits and safety of its transit routes, pointing again to China's efforts to reduce its dependence on the Straits of Malacca.

In terms of geostrategic competition, the BRI is frequently depicted as a counterbalance to the U.S.'s 'Pivot to Asia'. The Obama administration launched a series of diplomatic, military, and economic initiatives collectively labelled as a U.S. 'pivot' (or 'rebalance') towards the Asia-Pacific. At the diplomatic level, Washington signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN (2009), joined the East Asia Summit (2011), and repeatedly affirmed the U.S. had 'national interest' in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. In the military realm, the U.S. Department of Defence in 2012 released a new *Defense Strategic Guidance*, stating clearly that U.S. security interests are 'inextricably linked to the developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia'. Consequently, the U.S. military would 'rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region' [U.S. Department of Defense 2012]. Finally, on the economic front, the U.S. entered negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a comprehensive and high-standard free trade agreement that would liberalise trade in the Pacific Rim. Given the above, some scholars interpret the BRI as China's effort to counterbalance the U.S.'s 'Pivot to Asia' [Wang 2012; Fallon 2014].[19]

Japanese scholars actively participate in the ongoing debate. Yamamoto Yoshinobu examines the potential impact of the BRI on the liberal international order from a threefold perspective of 'might' (= geopolitics), 'money' (= geoeconomics), and 'mind' (= geohistory), urging scholars to pay closer attention to the ideational impact of the initiative [Yamamoto Y. 2016]. Yamamoto Takehiko constructs his analysis around the triad of 'geopolitics-geoeconomics-geoscience and technology', concluding that Japan should adopt the strategy of bandwagoning vis-à-vis the BRI [Yamamoto T. 2018].[20] Rooted in geopolitical imagery, Hane's essay analyses the BRI in the context of a 'land power vs. sea power' discourse, drawing historical comparison with two European land powers—the German Empire (1871–1918) and the Austro-Hungary Empire (1867–1918) [Hane 2020: 235–255].

The possibility of global power shift is another major strand of debate on the BRI. Mifune offers an excellent introduction to the BRI as a component of China's geostrategy against the backdrop of the G-Zero world [Mifune 2016].[21] Haba, on the other hand, examines the BRI and the AIIB through the lens of China-EU relations, pointing to the growing interconnectedness between the two global powers [Haba 2015]. The transformative impact of the BRI on Eurasian regional order and, by extension, Japan's position in the region is discussed by Kawai [Kawai 2018a, 2019].

Mega-regional trade agreements (MRTAs) are another topic often discussed in relation with the BRI.[22] MRTAs have been driven by an increasingly complicated and widespread network of international production sharing. In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, several large new trade deals (e.g. the TPP/the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)) have been proposed to boost production, trade, and growth as well as fill the perceived gap in global trade governance.[23] Ehara depicts the BRI as an 'MRTA's incubator', pointing to an ever-growing network of strategic partnerships (*huoban guanxi*) and the BRI's five cooperation priorities as a centrepiece of an emerging China-led MRTA [Ehara 2015b, 2017, 2019c]. In the same vein, Ling interprets the BRI (including the AIIB) as a first step towards the creation of a China-led East Asian economic community [Ryō S. 2015]. A growing interest in MRTAs, a resort to protectionism in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and stalled Doha Round negotiations have prompted a debate on the current model of globalisation. From a globalisation point of view, as argued by Xue, the BRI can be interpreted as a China-led globalisation characterised by a new type of 'cooperation arrangement' and a push towards RMB internationalisation [Setsu 2017]. Adopting a similar position, Ke argues that, considering growing protectionist tendencies in the U.S., China has seized a role as a leader on globalisation [Ka 2018: 246–248].

Maritime security is another component of the debate on the BRI. As noted by Roland, although China's Ministry of National Defense (MND) publicly denies that the BRI has any military or geopolitical intent, the priority Beijing has given to the BRI over the past few years has resulted in the expansion of Chinese overseas activities, which in turn generated the need for military protection [Rolland 2019: 2]. Tsuchiya examines China's evolving military engagement along the BRI through the lens of China's expanding military diplomacy. The author concludes that while there is currently only one permanent overseas People's Liberation Army (PLA) support facility in Djibouti, a scenario in which commercial ports along the MSR might be developed into 'strategic support points'[24] providing fuel and supplies to the Chinese Navy cannot be excluded [Tsuchiya 2018]. Katō, on the other hand, takes the 'string of pearls' theory as a starting point in his examination of China's overseas port investment in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, paying particular attention to facilities (Kyaukpyu Port and Gwadar Port) that serve as the convergence points between the SREB and the MSR [Katō 2018]. Turning to the South Pacific, in his excellent study Yoshikawa maps out China's soft power push across the region, its deepening connections with Pacific Island governments and Japan's regional counterstrategy vis-à-vis BRI [Yoshikawa 2020].

China's military modernisation is another topic often discussed in relation with the BRI. As argued by Noguchi, there is a deep interconnectedness between the BRI and the modernisation of the PLA, insofar as they constitute the cornerstone of President Xi's Vision 2035 [Noguchi 2018]. Both the 18th and 19th Party Congress Reports include the national objective of China becoming a 'maritime power'[25]. The strategy comprises four pillars: 1) exploitation of marine resources, 2) development of marine economy, 3) protection of marine environment, and 4) protection of China's rights and interests with regard to territorial claims.[26] In his study on China's marine economy under the BRI, Kawashima shows there is no clear delineation between the goal of expanding China's marine economy and the objective of China becoming a great 'maritime power', pointing to a constant interplay between economic and security factors [Kawashima 2018].

Over the years, the scope of the BRI has expanded from the originally envisioned SREB and MSR to include outer space, cyberspace (the so-called 'Digital Silk Road'), and the Arctic (the so-called 'Polar Silk Road'). Kodama's informative report presents a brief overview of the information and communications technology (ICT)-related projects and international cooperation agreements, along with recent developments in the BRI's Space Information Corridor (SIC) [Kodama 2019]. Ōki's article provides a valuable insight into the expansion of a China-led 5G network in the context of Sino-American high-tech rivalry and the inevitable rise of emerging economies on the international scene [Ōki 2019]. Ishihara's well-researched studies on the security dimension of the Polar Silk Road and Ōtsuka's analysis of the Arctic route's potential as an energy and transport corridor add to the existing knowledge of the topic [Ishihara 2019, 2020; Ōtsuka 2019].

3.1. Japanese Government's Stance on the BRI

Having discussed the main threads of scholarly debate over the BRI, the second part of this section addresses the Japanese government's stance on the initiative. Broadly speaking, the Abe administration's position on the BRI evolved from non-participation to conditional engagement.[27] The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) recognises that the BRI poses a broad range of geopolitical/geoeconomic threats to the American-led global liberal order. It tends to perceive the BRI as a grand strategy to be used by Beijing to gradually transform global/regional orders by articulating parallel or alternative norms and institutions to those currently in place.

In response to the perceived threat, on the economic front, Japan led the campaign to save the TPP after the U.S. withdrawal (30 January 2017), pushed for the loan reform of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and forged ahead with the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), an ambitious infrastructure development strategy aiming to counterbalance the BRI. At the diplomatic level, in 2016, Abe formally introduced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy—a set of objectives that would guide Japan's cooperation with like-minded countries to maintain prosperity, security, and a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific. These priorities include: 1) enhancing strategic cooperation with countries that share Japan's security interests (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; QSD), 2) promoting fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation and the rule of law, 3) advancing prosperity by enhancing connectivity, including infrastructure development (the PQI), and 4) demonstrating a commitment to peace and stability in areas such as capacity building for maritime security and disaster risk reduction [Gaimushō 2018: 18–19].

In April 2015, Prime Minister Abe met President Xi in Jakarta, on the sidelines of the 60th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. In regard to the AIIB, while Abe acknowledged Asia's infrastructure needs, he asked for further clarification on the AIIB's good governance standards and debt sustainability for borrowers. As for the BRI, Abe indicated that Japan watched closely how the BRI would materialise in the future [Gaimushō 2015].

Following the surprise election of Donald Trump to the presidency, the U.S. turned towards an inward-looking and protectionist direction. In line with the 'America First' slogan, Trump withdrew the U.S. signature from the TPP, renegotiated the NAFTA, and started multiple trade conflicts with allies and rivals alike. Ironically, Trump's opposition to multilateral trade frameworks as well as his transactional approach, pushed Abe to revisit Japan's China policy, which in turned resulted in more opportunities for enhanced economic cooperation with China including the BRI [Tōgō 2018: 61]. In his speech at the 23rd International Conference on the Future of Asia in June 2017, Abe offered a sort of 'conditional support' for the BRI, insisting that its infrastructure facilities 1) need to be developed through transparent and fair procurement and opened to all, and 2) need to be economically viable and consider borrowers' repayment capacity. Also, Abe pointed out that the BRI is expected to contribute to the peace and prosperity of the regions and the world. If the above-mentioned conditions are met, Japan would be willing to cooperate with China on infrastructure projects [Shushō Kantei 2017].

In November 2017, the Japanese government issued a guideline for Japanese enterprises on Japan-China business cooperation in infrastructure development in third-party markets in area such as 1) energy conservation and environmental protection, 2) industrial upgrading, and 3) logistics [Iida 2018: 5]. In May 2018, Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan, and the two governments signed the 'Memorandum on Business Cooperation in Third Countries' as well as agreed to set up a committee to discuss specific projects [Keizai Sangyōshō 2018]. In October of the same year, during Abe's state visit to China, the two sides jointly held the 1st China-Japan Third-Party Market Cooperation Forum (TPMCF) and signed 52 memoranda of understanding to tap into new business opportunities.

Japanese scholars have been closely following the changing trajectory of Japan-China relations. As noted earlier, Tōgō provides an insightful analysis of Japan's evolving attitude towards the BRI between 2013 and 2017 [Tōgō 2018]. Suwa, on the other hand, argues in favour of Japan employing a two-pronged strategy of strengthening Japan's participation in the BRI-related projects (including the AIIB), while deepening cooperation with like-minded governments to coordinate efforts at securing a rules-based, inclusive, and transparent framework of regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and beyond [Suwa 2018]. In her thorough analysis of the recent thaw in Japan-China relations, Etō makes the case for a three-pronged strategy consisting of a cautious approach to security issues while broadening economic cooperation and pursuing a path of co-existence in international society [Etō 2019].

The BRI has often been examined against the backdrop of the U.S. (and its allies) efforts to retain Western hegemony over global trade governance. Considering the trade potential in the Asia-Pacific, the TPP/CPTPP has been interpreted as an action to decrease economic dependency on China and/or as the countermeasure to a nascent Chinese rule-based trade order. Published in 2016 and 2018 respectively, Ōhashi and Akiyama's articles trace the trajectory of the TPP negotiations (including its ambitious agenda and the U.S. withdrawal) against the backdrop of the growing trade interdependence along the BRI [Ōhashi 2016; Akiyama 2018]. Jin Jianmin's analysis focuses on the mutual complementarity of the TPP and the BRI, pointing to the RECEP as a converging point for Japan-China economic cooperation [Kin 2018]. From a theoretical perspective, Kabashima's study examines the TPP and the BRI through the lens of various theories of regionalism, in an effort to map out the characteristics of 21st century regionalism [Kabashima 2018].

Japan's FOIP strategy is another topic often discussed in relation with the BRI. Yamazaki's well-researched study provides a valuable insight into India's motivation behind endorsing the FOIP—its uneasiness or even suspicion towards the BRI, its 'Necklace of Diamonds' and 'Look East' strategies, its tense relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as India's ambivalent attitude towards the Trump administration [Yamazaki 2018].

Lee's study offers an in-depth analysis of the South Korean government's 'New Southern Policy' envisaged as a delicate balancing act between the BRI and the FOIP [Rī 2020]. Kotani examines the FOIP through the geopolitical lens, positioning the strategy as a response to China's encroachment in the areas of maritime and digital security [Kotani 2019]. Sasuga offers a comparative analysis of the transformative impact of the BRI and the FOIP on international economic order, while Shōji examines the ASEAN's response to a growing Sino-U.S. competition in the Indo-Pacific [Sasuga 2017; Shōji 2020]. From a mid- to long-term perspective, Takahara argues that the BRI and the FOIP are likely to co-exist in the Indo-Pacific, with third market cooperation creating space for Japan to participate in the BRI-related projects [Takahara 2020].

4. FIVE COOPERATION PRIORITIES

4.1. Policy Coordination

Broadly speaking, policy coordination under the BRI refers to intergovernmental consultations and the building of macro-policy exchange and communication mechanisms. Partner countries, after identifying key areas of cooperation, proceed to establish a collaboration framework with China. It is often the case that BRI-participating countries realign/readjust their development strategies to match that of the BRI in order to draw greater benefits from the participation—Kazakhstan's *Nurly Zhol* and Pakistan's *Pakistan 2025* development strategies are good examples of policy coordination under the BRI.

Scholars have yet to develop a comprehensive analytical framework for the study of the operation of the BRI. As regards the concept of 'policy coordination', the following points are worth noting: 1) legal analysis is critical to our understanding of the policy coordination processes, 2) the analysis of the BRI-related institutions and arrangements needs to incorporate both the international and China's domestic dimensions, 3) the analysis of the BRI-related international institutions and arrangements needs to incorporate both bilateral and multilateral dimensions as well as differentiate between soft law and hard law, and 4) China's domestic policy readjustment/realignment forms an integral part of the policy coordination under the BRI.

Tying together the above variables, Table 1 proposes a comprehensive framework for the study of the BRI-related institutions and arrangements. To begin with, the concept of 'soft law' is crucial to our understanding of policy coordination under the BRI. The term refers to 'any written international instrument, other than a treaty, containing principles, norms, standards, or other statements of expected behaviour'. Soft law, thus, expresses the preference (and not an obligation) for certain behaviour with an aim to achieve functional cooperation among states to reach international goals [Shelton 2009: 69]. BRI-related soft law documents include memoranda of understanding (MoUs), memoranda of arrangement (MoAs), protocols, joint statements, action plans, guiding principles, etc.[28] Given that soft-law documents constitute a majority of the BRI legal framework, it becomes clear that China prefers to engage via less formal but more flexible arrangements. As for multilateral arrangements, the BRF, the Green Investment Principles for the BRI, and the High-Level Conference on Intellectual Property for Countries along the BRI are representative examples.

Alongside the use of soft law, Beijing has moved ahead with the BRI's institutionalisation. Domestically, examples include the establishment of the CIDCA, the pilot free trade zones (PFTZs) and state-owned investment funds-related legal frameworks, as well as the creation of two international commercial courts (ICCs) based in Xian and Shenzhen respectively.[29] Internationally, China's institution building efforts are best epitomised by the AIIB and the NDB.

Turning to the issue of policy realignment/readjustment, it is crucial to realise that the term encompasses not only BRI partner countries' policy realignment vis-à-vis China, but also multilateral cooperation mechanisms (e.g. China-CEEC cooperation) and China's domestic policy realignment (e.g. the Western Regions Development Strategy (WRDS)).[30]

As argued by Takagi, areas of Chinese law most likely to be affected by the BRI include: 1) foreign investment law, 2) corporate law (especially merger and acquisition (M&A) law and securities regulations), 3) state-owned enterprises (SOEs)-related law, and 4) labour law [Takagi 2018]. A broader perspective has been adopted by Matsushita who proposes to examine the pace and the scope of legal transformation under the BRI through the lens of a 'development policy law', an umbrella term that encompasses nine main areas: 1) risk management law, 2) subsidy-related measures, 3) SOEs-related law, 4) public procurement law, 5) procedures for mutual certification of standards, 6) regulatory framework for outward direct investment (ODI), 7) sustainable development-related law, 8) competition law, and 9) cross-border dispute resolution [Matsushita 2017].

As early as 2015, China's Supreme People's Court (SPC) issued the 'Several Opinions on Providing Judicial Services and Safeguards for the Construction of the BRI', in which the SPC commits itself to providing judicial safeguards for the BRI and promoting the mechanisms of cross-bor-

Table 1. A Framework for the Study of Policy Coordination under the BRI

		BILATERAL INSTITUTIONS & ARRANGEMENTS	MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS & ARRANGEMENTS	(China's) DOMESTIC INSTITUTIONS
Normative Framework	SOFT LAW	●Memoranda of understanding (MoUs) ●Memoranda of arrangement (MoAs) ●Protocols ●Joint statements	●Belt and Road Forum ●High-Level Conference on Intellectual Property for Countries along the BRI ●Green Investment Principles for the BRI ●Silk Road Think Tank Network	●Conference of Presidents of Supreme Courts of China
	HARD LAW	●Preferential trade and investment agreements ●Cross-border economic cooperation zones ●Overseas economic and trade cooperation zones	●AIIB ●NDB	●CIDCA ●International commercial courts (ICCs) ●Pilot free trade zones (PFTZs) ●Silk Road Fund (SRF)
Policy Realignment/ Readjustment		●Realigning partner countries' development strategies ●Renegotiating terms of BRI contracts	●BRI-EAEU cooperation ●China-Arab states '1 + 2 + 3' cooperation network ●China-CEEC cooperation	●Western Regions Development Strategy (WRDS)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

der dispute resolution [Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zuigao Renmin Fayuan 2015].[31] Four years later, in December 2019, the 'Further Opinions on Providing Judicial Services and Safeguards for the Construction of the BRI' was issued, given the SPC opportunity to press further ahead with the internationalisation of Chinese courts. In Section 3 of the 2019 'Opinions', the SPC urges lower courts to respect international practices and international commercial rules, fully respect the parties' governing law choice, as well as (if the need arises) explain in detail the procedure for determining the governing law. In relation to the ICCs, the SPC recognises their operation needs further improvement [Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zuigao Renmin Fayuan 2019]. Also, as noted by Finder, the SPC instructs lower courts to apply the principle of presumptive reciprocity, signalling a gradual shift to promoting mutual recognition and enforcement of international commercial court judgements [Finder 2020].

The steady growth of China's ODI under the BRI has led Chinese companies to give careful thought to various dispute resolution mechanisms. Simultaneously, as indicated by the SPC's opinions, Chinese courts have been taking proactive steps to promote enforcement of foreign judgements based on reciprocity. These rapid changes in the BRI's legal framework have been followed closely by legal scholars. Sun examines commercial arbitration frameworks in the PFTZs, while Kajita draws attention to China's changing attitude towards investment dispute resolution mechanisms [Son 2017; Kajita 2018]. An urgent need for a uniform trade law framework as a precondition for a truly seamless trade system and the possible role of the UN Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) as a 'common foundation' of such a system is discussed in detail by Hirano [Hirano 2019].

Government-level bilateral MoUs promise cooperation within the framework of the BRI, while substantiating the legitimacy of the initiative. As of January 2021, the number of countries that have joined the BRI by signing a MoU/MoA/protocol/joint statement with China is 140.[32] The basic structure of the agreement is similar—after pledging to enhance policy coordination, the signing parties agree on cooperation in areas such as transportation infrastructure development, joint set-up of industrial parks/cross-border economic cooperation zones (CBECZs),[33] trade and investment promotion, financial cooperation, cultural exchanges, establishment of sister-city networks, collaboration in regional initiatives, etc. In addition, BRI-participating countries often adjust their existing development strategies to increase the benefits of participation in the BRI.

China-Malaysia relations under the BRI help scholars decipher how domestic actors engage with the BRI in different settings. BRI projects instigated under the Najib administration (April 2009–May 2018) were discontinued or suspended under the Prime Minister Mahathir (May 2018–March 2020). On the eve of the 2nd BRF, China and Malaysia concluded a renegotiation of the terms of the East Coast Rail Link and revived the China-backed Bandar Malaysia project (a mixed-use property development in Kuala Lumpur). As a result of above, while attending the 2nd BRF, Mahathir not only stated his ‘full support’ for the BRI (a sharp contrast to his earlier criticism), but oversaw the signing of a deal to develop an artificial intelligence (AI) park in Malaysia. Overall, the experience of Malaysia has shown that key players in the host economy are able to successfully renegotiate the project terms with Chinese counterparts.

Ōki’s study offers a comparative analysis of Pakistan, Myanmar, and Malaysia’s efforts to renegotiate the BRI-related projects [Ōki 2018]. China’s BRI-related investments under the Najib administration are discussed by Onozawa, while Kaneko’s chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the Mahathir administration’s efforts to reformulate China-Malaysia ties [Onozawa 2017; Kaneko 2020]. In a well-researched study, Arai Etsuyo maps out the trajectory of China-Sri Lanka cooperation under the BRI, with a particular focus on the Hambantota Port project [Arai E. 2018]. Drawing on field interviews, Hirose discusses the core opportunities and risks of the BRI-related investment in Kyrgyzstan, painting a comprehensive picture of China’s growing presence in the country [Hirose 2020]. Case studies of Indonesia’s Sea Power Strategy [Kawamura 2018], Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 [Takao 2020], and Mongolia’s Steppe Road Programme [Hanada 2019] add knowledge to our understanding of partner countries’ policy realignment vis-à-vis China’s BRI.

As regards Japan-China policy coordination under the BRI, the focus so far has been on so-called ‘third market cooperation’. The term refers to the economic cooperation between Chinese companies and enterprises from developed countries in third-party markets along the BRI. As noted by Duchâtel, countries that have signed third-party cooperation agreements with China have two things in common: 1) they are advanced economies with a strong infrastructure basis, and 2) they have been relatively sceptical regarding the BRI [Duchâtel 2019]. In other words, third market cooperation creates space for advanced economies to participate in the BRI-related projects without officially endorsing the initiative. Sōma offers an insider’s account of Abe administration efforts to enhance economic cooperation with China under the BRI, a process that culminated in the signing of the ‘Memorandum on Business Cooperation in Third Countries’ in May 2018 [Sōma 2018]. As a part of the *J + C Economic Journal*’s special issue on Japan-China third market cooperation, Koyama discusses four potential areas of Sino-Japanese economic cooperation: 1) infrastructure projects, 2) exploitation of natural resources, 3) inclusion of Japanese-affiliated companies in China into China’s BRI-related projects in third-party markets, and 4) Chinese companies’ direct investment in Japan [Koyama 2019]. Sakō, on the other hand, draws attention to Sino-Japanese joint infrastructure projects in third countries, examining this emerging pattern of business cooperation through the case study of Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor [Sakō 2019].

The BRI not only contributes to China's growing economic presence abroad, but provides new development opportunities for China's western regions. Once largely excluded from the country's economic growth, China's inland and border areas have gained recognition as transportation, trade, and supply chain hubs under the BRI. Ōnishi offers an in-depth analysis of the BRI through the lens of China's shift to a 'New Normal' model of economic development, arguing that the BRI should be interpreted not only as a new stage in China's opening-up strategy, but also a new stage in its Western Regions Development Strategy [Ōnishi 2020b: 40]. Similarly, Mu examines the initiative through the lens of China's post-1949 regional development policy, depicting the BRI as its seventh and most recent stage centred on the idea of the 'unification of regional economies'[34] [Boku 2016, 2019]. These bird's eye view analyses are supported by a wealth of case studies. Ehara's discussion of the BRI's impact on China's Northeast Area Revitalization Plan[35] [Ehara 2015a], Xiao et al.'s examination of Inner Mongolia's role as a gateway to China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) [Gyō, Shō, and Kan 2018], Li and Mu's report on Henan Province's transformation of its industrial structure under the BRI [Ri K. and Boku 2018], Okamoto's evaluation of Chongqing's prospects as a logistics hub and industrial cluster [Okamoto 2015], and Gotō and Hao's article on the role of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area as a BRI financial and innovation hub [Gotō T. and Kaku 2019]: all these studies contribute to our understanding of the process of China's development policy realignment under the BRI.

4.2. Facilities Connectivity

There is little doubt that economic development in Asia and Africa is hampered by weak infrastructure facilities. Positioning itself as a champion of South-South cooperation, China offers technological expertise and financial capabilities to construct railways, highways, bridges, oil and gas pipelines, power plants, seaports and dry ports, as well as ICT facilities.

BRI's infrastructure projects can best be treated under six headings: 1) land transport infrastructure (road and highways, trains, dry ports, etc.), 2) maritime transport infrastructure, 3) energy infrastructure (oil and gas pipelines, wind and solar farms, power stations, etc.), 4) extractive industry infrastructure (mines, logging), 5) ICT infrastructure, and 6) smart city infrastructure. These six areas are discussed in detail below.

A recent World Bank study has predicted that the impact of BRI investments in transport should prove positive, albeit not for all partner countries. The improved transport network should reduce trade times and cost and increase overall trade as BRI partner economies increase exports and diversify their production. The decline in trade times should also increase FDI, especially for lower-income countries. The increased trade and investment should, in turn, boost GDP and welfare, thus reducing poverty. In sum, the improved transportation network should lead to aggregate gains, although individual countries may lose due to the high cost of infrastructure relative to trade gains [Ruta et al. 2019: 45–64].

Published on the eve of the 2nd BRF (25–27 April 2019), Kojima's article offers a comprehensive analysis of the BRI's transport infrastructure projects, pointing to partner countries' initial enthusiasm and subsequent efforts to renegotiate agreements due to 'debt trap' fears [Kojima 2019]. As a part of *Transportation and Economy*'s special issue on the BRI, Shibasaki discusses the SREB's (mostly positive) impact on Eurasian transportation network [Shibasaki 2018], while Miyashita offers a succinct analysis of the BRI's strengths and weaknesses from the viewpoint of China's overall logistics performance [Miyashita 2018].

Land transport infrastructure-related studies focus mainly on Eurasian rail network [Ri S. 2016; Fujita 2018; Ozawa 2019], including a comparative perspective on the Trans-Siberian Railway and the China-Europe Railway Express[36] [Tsuji 2017, 2019]. In addition, a well-researched study on Kazakhstan's growing rail hub and its logistics adds to the existing knowledge of the topic [Shibasaki and Arai H. 2018].

Regarding maritime transport-related studies, Honzu's report on China's maritime transport policy under the BRI offers an excellent introduction to the topic [Honzu 2016]. Miura Yoshio's article discusses China's container shipping business sector, including the 2016 merger of COSCO Group and China Shipping Group, a move that gave birth to the world's 4th largest shipping company [Miura Yoshio 2017]. Itō Masahiro's study on the role of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area in promoting connectivity along the MSR offers further clarification on China's maritime transport strategy under the BRI [Itō M. 2018].

Kaigai Denryoku's report on China's electric power industry provides valuable background information on Chinese ODI activities in the energy sector [Sanada 2019]. In Central Asia, China's focus is on linking local oil and gas suppliers with its market as well as the exploration and extraction of energy and mineral resources in the region. Shinohara's well-researched study identifies links between China's evolving oil and gas policy, BRI-related projects in Central Asia as well as the leading role of China's state-owned energy companies (CNPC, Sinopec, and CNOOC) in building energy infrastructure in the region [Shinohara 2018]. Honma's discussion of the Myanmar-China oil and gas pipelines contributes further to our understanding of China's energy strategy under the BRI [Honma 2019].

As was mentioned in Section 3, the Digital Silk Road covers the ICT infrastructure, with a particular focus on overland and undersea optical cables, 5G networks, the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System as well as devices that connect to these systems. Kodama presents a brief overview of ICT infrastructure buildup along the BRI [Kodama 2019], while Ōki discusses the China-led 5G network expansion in the context of Sino-American high-tech rivalry and the inevitable rise of emerging economies on the international scene [Ōki 2019].

Lastly, the development of smart city infrastructure alongside the BRI will be briefly discussed. Broadly speaking, 'smart cities' refer to urban areas that utilise advanced ICT and the internet of things to integrate municipal services, monitor traffic and pollution, and facilitate ecological waste management to make cities more efficient, clean, and safe. In a thought-provoking article, Gotō Yasuhiro discusses the trajectory of urban development in Asia and the emerging connectivity under the BRI in the context of Schumpeter's view on innovation [Gotō Y. 2018]. Arai Ken'ichirō's articles draw a fascinating picture of China's growing presence in the Jakarta Metropolitan Area (including the controversial Meikarta Smart City project) pointing to a complex interplay of AIIB-funded infrastructure projects, mainland Chinese property developers' activities and their links to ethnic Chinese businesses in Indonesia [Arai K. 2019, 2020].

4.3. Unimpeded Trade

Trade facilitation and removal of investment barriers are important areas of cooperation under the BRI. Simplifying customs clearance systems, sharing shipping information and mutual recognition of certifications result in lowering cross-border transaction costs. Bilateral investment treaties, double taxation avoidance agreements, as well as the removal of investment barriers create a conducive business environment. Finally, ICT connectivity encourages e-commerce. Before proceeding to examine trade connectivity along the SREB, the ongoing phenomenon of global trade fragmentation will be discussed.

There is little doubt that the global trade regime created seven decades ago needs renovation and updating to meet new challenges. The current situation is the result of a confluence of several long-term trends, including: 1) China's rapid economic rise that has been reordering trade and investment patterns across the globe, 2) the political and economic fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis that has resulted in a decline in international capital flows and slower growth, 3) the economic clash between the U.S. and China that has resulted in the decoupling of U.S.-China economic ties and the reshaping of global and regional supply chains, and 4) new waves of technological change and digitisation which are transforming the global trade system.[37]

One consequence of the above trends has been that trade liberalisation and new trade rules are increasingly being negotiated in the context of preferential trade agreements (PTAs). As noted by Boonekamp, the mega-regional initiatives pursued by major OECD member countries (including the TPP and the TTIP) appear to be better attuned to the needs of transnational corporations and the dynamics of international trade than is the WTO [Boonekamp 2017: 210–213]. Also, the launch of mega-regional PTAs was, at least in part, motivated by the economic rise of China—an effort to deepen integration among 'like-minded', democratic market-based countries in order to retain Western hegemony over global trade governance.

In response to the mega-regional trade and investments negotiations launched by the U.S., China has been pursuing its own strategy. This is centred on the BRI, the AIIB, and China's participation in the RCEP. The RCEP, in which China is a leading force, requires that all members have an FTA with ASEAN. Although India dropped out of the talks in November 2019, the RCEP members (China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the 10 members of the ASEAN) still account for around 30 % of global GDP and population. A study published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics projects that the deal will raise annual global income in 2030 by USD 186 billion, with China, Japan, and South Korea standing to gain the most [Petri and Plummer 2020: 5].

Trade and investment linked to the BRI is concentrated in Asia. As of 2018, China's major export destinations among the BRI countries were Vietnam (11.9 % of total exports to the BRI countries), Singapore (7.1 %), Russia (6.8 %), Malaysia (6.5 %), Indonesia (6.1 %), and Thailand (6.1 %). Also, China has developed strong commercial ties with countries with large resource reserves—Russia and Saudi Arabia were respectively third (10.4 % of total imports from the BRI countries) and fourth (8.2 %) among China's imports partners [The Economist Corporate Network 2019: 8].

China's ODI in BRI countries has steadily increased as a proportion of the country's total ODI flows—although in 2020 Chinese investments in BRI countries decreased to USD 47 billion (about 54 % less than in 2019 and about USD 78 billion less than in the peak year of 2015), investments in non-BRI countries dropped a whopping 70 % to about USD 17 billion from 2019 to 2020. East Asia and South Asia continued to receive the largest share of China's BRI investments (about 37 % and 17 % respectively), with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Pakistan seeing considerable increase in Chinese investment despite the COVID-19 pandemic (most likely driven by near-shoring to avoid American sanctions). The focus of the BRI continues to be in transport and energy infrastructure, with energy investments constituting the majority of all BRI investments by volume. In 2020, renewable energy investments (solar, wind, and hydro) for the first time made up the majority of Chinese overseas energy investments—increasing their share from 35 % in 2017 to 57 % in 2020 [Nedopil Wang 2021: 3–10].[38] From the above, two long-term, interrelated tendencies emerge: 1) the BRI has augmented Chinese investment in partner countries relative to the rest of the world, and 2) a 'green shift' in China's BRI investments is under way, a move likely to make the initiative attractive to investors for the coming decades.

In a series of articles, Ōnishi offers a comprehensive analysis of the BRI, pointing to the initiative's overlapping roles as 1) a new stage in China's opening-up strategy, 2) a new stage in its Western Regions Development Strategy, and 3) a vital component of China's economic diplomacy [Ōnishi 2019, 2020a, 2020b]. The author concludes by noting that China's ongoing structural transformation has had important ramifications for global trade and investment. To begin with, China's stubbornly high trade surplus has attracted widespread criticism and led the Chinese government to unveil a series of incentives to promote investment abroad—a move epitomised by the 'Go Global' strategy and the BRI. Next, China's seemingly insatiable appetite for natural resources has adversely affected many natural resources exporting countries, resulting in their overreliance on the Chinese market and a slowdown in the process of industrialisation. Lastly, the growing Chinese presence in the infrastructure and ICT sectors will sooner or later lead to the (partial/sectoral) incorporation of Chinese-style regulations [Ōnishi 2020b: 49–51]. In another well-researched article, Itō Asei examines trade and investment under the BRI in the context of the economic nexus between China and emerging economies, arguing that the initiative has yielded mixed results so far and pointing to China's efforts to expand the BRI 'beyond infrastructure' [Itō A. 2018].

The BRI has helped China in diversifying its trading relationships. Indicators suggest that China's trading activities with countries along the BRI route have steadily increased since 2013, when the initiative was launched. As pointed out by Narahashi, between 2013 and 2017 this was especially true in Southeast Asia and West Asia [Narahashi 2017].

In another development, to further deregulate investment and financial services and simplify trade procedures, China has been gradually expanding its PFTZs programme.[39] The first PFTZ was opened in Shanghai in 2013, followed by three more (in Tianjin, Fujian, and Guangdong) in 2015. In 2016, the State Council unveiled seven new PFTZs, five of which are in inland locations (Henan, Hubei, Shaanxi, Chongqing, and Sichuan). In 2019, the State Council announced the expansion of the PFTZ programme to six new provinces across the country: Jiangsu, Shandong, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Guangxi, and Yunnan. Recently established PFTZs in inland provinces are expected to serve as a trade gateway to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Russia and help to spread economic activity inland. In 2020, the State Council released a large-scale plan to transform the entire island of Hainan into a free trade port (FTP), making it an important node on the MSR and a frontline to China's integration with ASEAN countries [Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang Weiyuanhui and Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guowuyuan 2020].[40] In tandem with the PFTZs, with an aim of deepening cross-border trade and expanding industrial cooperation, the Chinese government has been promoting the creation of CBECZs. Ōizumi and Itō Asei's well-researched report on the status of the PFTZs within the BRI framework and Mimura's field survey report on the Mohan-Boten cross-border economic zone both add to our understanding of the issue [Ōizumi and Itō A. 2016; Mimura 2018].

As noted by Arase, for all the progress the BRI had made, around 2019 it became clear that the risk-accumulating public infrastructure mega-projects cooperation formula needed revision. Thus, despite the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown, there is a rising trend of Chinese investors branching out into the ICT sector, IoT projects (such as smart-cities) and health-related industries [Arase 2021]. Adopting a similar position, Xu argues that the future of China's infrastructure investment along the BRI lies in healthcare and social infrastructure as well as maintaining a balance between foreign aid, investment, and trade activities [Jo 2020]. In a series of thought-provoking studies, Kuchiki places the BRI in the context of China's evolving industrial policy, drawing attention to an emerging three-pronged strategy that involves the PFTZ-centred industrial clusters, a shift towards digital and green infrastructure, and supply chain integration along the BRI [Kuchiki 2018, 2019, 2020].

The issue of risk management has been looming large over the BRI since its inception. The often risky political and economic environment in BRI countries poses a challenge for Chinese investors searching for profit along the BRI. Investors must therefore prepare and formulate a clear approach to managing risk. Also, as noted by Wu, China has not yet established a comprehensive legal framework covering the political risks of overseas investment, with bilateral investment treaties (BITs) offering insufficient protection in this area [Wu 2020: 196]. Miura Yūji's in-depth study of different types of investment risk Chinese companies are exposed to, including the pattern of their railway and nuclear energy infrastructure investments along the BRI, the trajectory of their not always successful M&A activities as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the centrally managed 'Go Global' strategy, offers a comprehensive picture of challenges Chinese investors face while managing their international projects [Miura Yūji 2017].

4.4. Financial Integration

As mentioned in the introduction, the BRI is financed by four institutional mechanisms: 1) China's policy banks (the CDB and the EXIM), 2) state-owned commercial banks (the ABC, the BOC, the CCB, and the ICBC), 3) state-owned investment funds (e.g. the SRF), and 4) China-led multilateral development banks (the AIIB and the NDB). In addition, to enhance funding for bilateral joint projects, Chinese banks initiated interbank cooperation mechanisms in the CEEC, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the available data, the EXIM and the CDB are two major lenders, accounting for 40 % and 31.5 % of total outstanding loans, while loans extended by four state-owned commercial banks account for 23 % of the total. By 2018, the AIIB's loans to the BRI countries stood at USD 8 billion, accounting for 2.3 % of the total [Liu, Zhang, and Xiong 2020: 140–141].

Bilateral currency swap agreements reduce exchange risk and transaction costs for trade and investment between China and the BRI countries. Meanwhile, offshore RMB bonds (the so-called 'dim-sum' bonds) are encouraged as an alternative RMB fundraising platform for mainland firms to support their ODI activities, and by extension, finance the BRI's infrastructure projects. All the above measures help promote RMB internationalisation and strengthen financial and economic linkages between China and the BRI-participating countries.

Since the global financial crisis, China has become a major lender to developing economies along the BRI. The recently released dataset from the Global Development Policy Center (GDPC) shows that China's outbound lending between 2008 and 2019 amounted to USD 462 billion, almost on par with the World Bank's lending during the same period (USD 467 billion) [Ray and Simmons 2020].[41] Unsurprisingly, the sheer scale of China's lending activities has led to China being accused of pursuing 'debt trap diplomacy'.[42]

The GDPC dataset also shows that the lending commitments from

China's two policy banks (the EXIM and the CDB) peaked in 2016, and that China's outbound lending has been in decline since 2016 [Ray and Simmons 2020]. Broadly speaking, the reason for the lending slowdown is fourfold. First, China's big banks are re-evaluating their lending practices after a series of high-profile stumbles; there has been a shift towards lending to smaller, more sustainable projects. Second, as Chinese loans extended for transport and energy infrastructure projects typically have a 5- to 6-year grace period, recipient countries are about to start repaying many of the loans extended during the 2015/2016 peak. It appears that the issue of debt servicing makes China's lenders reluctant to sign new lending deals.[43] Third, a growing number of countries have re-evaluated their involvement in the BRI and cancelled/renegotiated high-risk projects. Fourth, due to the COVID-induced global economic slowdown, Beijing is facing a raft of debt relief requests. Before rolling out new loans, China's banks will have to renegotiate existing loans first.[44]

Maie offers a brief analysis of the BRI's funding mechanisms, concluding with the following finance-related challenges to the BRI: 1) the need to improve financial governance, 2) the 'debt trap' issue, 3) the AIIB's compliance with the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria, and 4) the government's control over the SOEs [Maie 2019]. Ikawa, on the other hand, approaches the issue of financial governance under the BRI from the perspective of the 'debt trap diplomacy' discourse, focusing on increasing debt vulnerabilities among emerging and low-income economies [Ikawa 2018].

In a paper recently published by Chatham House, Jones and Hameiri argue that developing countries' governments are not 'hapless victims of a predatory Beijing; they—and their associated political and economic interests—determine the nature of BRI projects on their territory'. The paper presents detailed case studies of Sri Lanka and Malaysia, concluding that the most controversial projects were initiated not by China but by the recipient governments in pursuit of their own domestic agendas. Consequently, their debt distress has not arisen from the granting of Chinese loans, but rather from the mismanagement of local elites as well as developments in international financial markets [Jones and Hameiri 2020: 3–4]. Adopting a similar position, Chang argues there is always a risk that borrowing for public infrastructure mega-projects will saddle the recipient country with hard-to-service debt and the lender with non-performing loans or default. From a long-term perspective, however, resilient public infrastructure plays a critical role in sustainable industrialisation, which in turn enables narrowing development gaps among countries as well as reducing domestic disparities. On the question of debt sustainability, Chang draws attention to China's efforts to address the issue through the introduction of the *Debt*

Sustainability Framework, a non-mandatory policy framework to conduct debt sustainability analysis and manage debt risks for investments in low-income countries [Shō S. 2019, 2020].

Hongō's comprehensive study provides a valuable insight into the funding of green infrastructure under the BRI. The author begins with basic concepts such as the BRI Green Investment Principles and green bonds, proceeds to examine the linkages between green finance and SDGs and concludes with an analysis of available financing options (the Japan-led ADB, the AIIB, the SRF, and green bond issuance) [Hongō 2020]. As regards the phenomenon of digital finance, Tashiro examines the overseas expansion of Chinese mobile payment platforms (represented by Alipay and WeChat Pay), pointing to a growing digital finance connectivity in countries along the BRI [Tashiro 2018].

Liu et al. identify five types of financial resources that China has mobilised in support of the BRI: 1) pure aid, 2) preferential loans, 3) development finance, 4) commercial loans, and 5) various special funds (e.g. the SRF) [Liu, Zhang, and Xiong 2020: 139]. Among the five types, development finance is particularly important for the BRI infrastructure development and connectivity projects. Although the CDB is the biggest development finance institution in the world and China's largest foreign investment and medium- to long-term credit bank, the scholarly focus has been mainly on the newly-established multilateral development bank—the AIIB. Yoshizaki outlines Japan's initial reaction to the AIIB, arguing that Japan should reconsider its position [Yoshizaki 2015]. Wang Zhiping briefly discusses the AIIB's Articles of Agreement and then proceeds to compare the AIIB with other funding institutions under the BRI [Ō Shihei 2017]. Similarly, Kawai analyses the AIIB as a financial arm of the BRI from a comparative perspective, offering a positive evaluation of the AIIB's achievements during the first two years of its operation [Kawai 2018b]. Shimizu approaches China's infrastructure investments (including those financed by the AIIB) through the lens of the Principles for Quality Infrastructure, a Japan-led initiative adopted by the G20 Osaka Summit in 2019 [Shimizu 2020].

4.5. People-to-People Bond

The BRI attempts to revive the ancient 'Silk Road spirit' of cooperation, openness, and inclusiveness; it promotes mutual learning and benefit through cultural and academic exchanges, tourism, as well as cooperation in science, technology, and healthcare fields [Sun 2020]. To meet these ambitious goals, the Chinese government needs to harmonise its infrastructure development strategy with new objectives that focus on culture and education. Indeed, as indicated in the 'Advancing People-to-People Exchanges' section of the Joint Communique of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd BRF, there is a new emphasis on strengthening cooperation in human resource development, education, and vocational and professional training along with the areas of science and technology, the protection of cultural heritage, tourism, health, and sports [Dierjie "Yidai Yilu" Guoji Hezuo Gaofeng Luntan 2019].

Given that people-to-people exchanges constitute a kind of 'social foundation' of the BRI, it comes as no surprise that most research on the BRI's fifth pillar has focused on cooperation in science and education, tourist activities, and meso-level studies. Among 25 studies included in this subsection, eight articles deal with education-related issues while four studies focus on tourism—these two areas are discussed in detail below. Other topics include China's religious policy [Matsumoto 2019b], China's cultural diplomacy [Kwon 2019], epistemic community building in East Asia [Ryū K. 2020], labour migration [Ryō R. N. 2019], and the role of overseas Chinese in promoting the BRI [Sai 2018].

In July 2016, the Ministry of Education (ME) issued the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road* and signed a memorandum of cooperation with 14 provinces with the aim of building a ministerial-provincial joint platform for the BRI [Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Jiaoyubu 2016]. In addition, leading programmes like the Silk Road Scholarship[45] and the Silk Road Teacher Training Enhancement Program[46] were launched as support for the BRI. According to the latest available data, in 2017 608,400 Chinese students left the country to pursue tertiary education abroad, whereas 489,200 international students furthered their studies in China [Xinhua Wang 2018]. Overall, China has become the country with the most outbound students in the world and the most popular destination country for students in Asia. Lastly, as of December 2019, there are 550 Confucius Institutes and 1172 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries and regions in the world.[47]

Wang Xueping's well-researched studies provide a valuable insight into China's international education exchange and its international student policy under the BRI [Ō Setsuhei 2017, 2019]. Miura Akiko examines the role of the Confucius Institutes in developing international Chinese language education under the BRI, focusing on South Asia [Miura A. 2018], while Misawa surveys Chinese language education in Egypt and Turkey [Misawa 2017]. Tanaka, on the other hand, offers a comprehensive analysis of Thai language education and Thai language studies in China under the BRI [Tanaka 2019]. In her timely survey, Shinbo provides a valuable insight into elementary school English language education in China [Shinbo 2018]. All above-mentioned studies add to our understanding of China's education policy under the BRI.

As regards tourism, Yu examines the BRI's impact on tourism in China, arguing that in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis the BRI has contributed to the increase in inbound tourism in China while the rapid growth in outbound tourism has led to a string of M&A in the online travel agency (OTA) market [Yu K. 2020]. Dai analyses the current state and prospects of the so-called 'China-Japan-South Korea international tourism block' under the BRI, while Im focuses on China's efforts to attract Japanese and Korean tourists to its Silk Road tours [Tai 2017; Imu 2018].

5. THEORISING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

So far this paper has discussed the main threads of the debate on the BRI in Japan (Section 3) and the BRI's Five Cooperation Priorities-related studies (Section 4). The following section will focus on theoretical and conceptual approaches Japanese scholars apply to study the BRI.

Since its inception in 2013, scholars have applied approaches from IR theory, foreign policy analysis, geopolitics, IPE, regionalism, and development studies, to name but a few, to make sense of the BRI. The mainstream IR theoretical perspectives tend to discuss the BRI within a broader context of the 'China's rise' debate. It is argued that Beijing has slowly but steadily been investing time and money into creating new norms in regional security and economic forums, thus diminishing the influence of the West (especially the U.S.). From this viewpoint, the BRI serves as a vehicle to promote China's worldview, challenging the norms the current global order is built upon.

As noted by Zhou and Esteban, the BRI is strongly driven by three factors: 1) China makes use of the BRI as a vehicle of soft balancing to undermine American power and deter the formation of any anti-China coalition, 2) China seeks to promote its role as a normative power, and 3) China intends to reshape global governance and transform the existing international system in a way that reflects its values, interest, and status [Zhou and Esteban 2018: 42]. Before proceeding to discuss Kaneko et al.'s monograph [Kaneko, Yamada, and Yoshino 2020], some aspects of the balance of power theory will be mentioned.

The concept of 'soft balancing' refers to the use of international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements to delay, frustrate, and undermine the hegemon's policy [Pape 2005]. The model of institutional balancing (understood as a form of soft balancing) integrates elements of neorealist and neoliberal theories allowing states to counter pressure or threats through initiating, utilising, and dominating multilateral institutions (the model has been further developed by the inclusion of the 'inter-institutional' balancing) [He 2009, 2018]. Lastly, the concept of 'sharp power' refers to an approach to international affairs that typically involves efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to undermine the integrity of democratic institutions. Today, as argued by Walker et al., the corrosive effects of China's sharp power are increasingly apparent in the sphere of publishing, culture, academia, and media [Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020].

Kaneko et al.'s monograph brings together leading Japanese experts in Southeast Asian studies to analyse the BRI's impact on ASEAN. In the first part, the authors set out to examine the growing Sino-U.S. strategic competition in ASEAN through the lens of 1) institutional balancing [Asano 2020], 2) regime shifting (the QUAD Security Dialogue) and competitive regime creation (the BRI and the AIIB) [Fukuda 2020], 3) Japan's efforts to preserve liberal international order in the region [Hirakawa S. 2020], and 4) sharp power [Kuroyanagi 2020]. The issues of non-traditional security threats (ASEAN counter-terrorism strategy) [Yamada 2020] and China's growing economic presence in the region [Yoshino 2020] are discussed to complement the picture. Taken as a whole, in the first part of the book, drawing on mainstream IR theoretical perspectives, the authors attempt to construct a conceptual framework for the study of ASEAN's transformations under the BRI. In the second part, the authors turn to state-level analysis, focusing on China's donor activities in Cambodia and Laos [Inada 2020], Vietnam's efforts to balance its development and security agenda [Ogasawara 2020], the BRI's impact on economic growth in 'post-junta' Myanmar [Kudō 2020], Mahathir administration efforts to reformulate China-Malaysia ties [Kaneko 2020], and Timor-Leste's diplomacy vis-à-vis China [Inoue 2020]. The above-mentioned studies offer a nuanced picture of the partner countries' strategies towards the BRI. Overall, Kaneko et al.'s monograph represents the most successful effort to date to apply IR theory to make sense of the BRI.

Outside mainstream IR theory, Suzuki makes a thought-provoking attempt to read the BRI through the lens of Wendt's quantum social science and modern Neo-Confucian thinking. In the final part of the *Quantum Mind and Social Science*, Wendt writes: 'Since the 1930s we have known that the causal closure principles in the universe as a whole are quantum mechanical rather than classical, where the physical constraints on explanation are radically different. In particular, quantum theory admits a neutral monist interpretation in which "physical" does not equal "material", and instead sees the material world described by classical physics and the mental world of consciousness as joint effects of an underlying reality that is neither' [Wendt 2015: 283]. As argued by Suzuki, Wendt's attempt at unifying physical and social ontology within a naturalistic worldview bears a close resemblance to Liang Shuming's postulate of the unity of thought and action, with both approaches offering an ontological foundation to the study of the BRI hereafter described as a 'Universe-Space-Heart' (天-空-心) initiative. Such a conceptualization of the BRI allows, in turn, for a frictionless co-existence of Confucian communalism, the individualism of the Vedas, and the Islamic principle of *tawhid* within 'Asia (that) is one' [Suzuki 2019].

6. CONCLUSION

This review article set out to examine how China's BRI has been portrayed in Japanese language literature. After careful examination of a rich and diverse body of work, three major findings have emerged. First, high-quality studies on the BRI appear both in scholarly journals published by universities and in a variety of think-tank publications. Studies published by the National Institute for Defense Studies and the Policy Research Institute (facilities established under the governmental organisations), the Japan Science and Technology Agency (a national research and development agency), the JETRO (an independent administrative institute), the ERINA, the Japan Institute of International Affairs, and the Ports and Harbours Association of Japan (public interest incorporated foundations), the Japanese Institute of International Business Law (a general incorporated association), the Institute for International Trade and Investment, the Institute of Transportation Economics, the Institute of Foreign Exchange and Trade Research, the Japan-China Economic Association, and the Japan Electric Power Information Center (general incorporated foundations), as well as the Japan Research Institute (a corporate think tank), feature prominently in this review article. To date, the most comprehensive report on the BRI (27 research articles and two interviews) was published by a monthly journal *Transportation and Economy*—the flagship publication of the Institute of Transportation Economics. Second, Japanese language scholarship on the BRI boasts a considerable number of meso-level studies. The term 'meso-level' is used here to refer to studies that focus on sub-national and local actor-level interactions, examine benefits and costs associated with the BRI projects in a specific local setting, and/or the role of the

SOEs and multinational corporations in projects implementation. As has been shown throughout Section 4 of this review article, Japanese scholars have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the implementation of the BRI at the local level. Third, Japanese language publications on theoretical and conceptual approaches to BRI are sparse. It is not clear whether this is a result of Japanese scholars' methodological choices or rather the consequence of the relative novelty of the topic—the BRI is, after all, a young initiative.

Different scholars have approached the BRI in a variety of ways. Generally, analysts in the security studies field tend to take a critical view of the BRI, whereas international business and development studies scholars tend to focus on positive developments. As is the case with American and European scholars, the debate on the BRI has been shaped by geopolitical imagery, with topics of the TPP/CPTPP-BRI competition, the FOIP, and maritime and digital security featuring prominently in the discussion.

Policy coordination under the BRI tends to be examined through the lens of international law, partner countries' policy realignment, and changes it brings to China's development policy. As regards Japan-China policy coordination, the third-market cooperation-related issues have been at the centre of scholarly attention so far. BRI's infrastructure projects are discussed under six headings: 1) land transportation infrastructure, 2) maritime transport infrastructure, 3) energy infrastructure, 4) extractive industry infrastructure, 5) ICT infrastructure, and 6) smart city infrastructure. Research on trade and investment under the BRI focuses on the economic nexus between China and emerging economies, investment risk, and the Japan-China third market cooperation. BRI's funding mechanisms are examined through the lens of a 'debt trap' narrative paying particular attention to China's lending practices. As is the case with American scholars, the AIIB has been one of the most hotly debated topics. Most research on the BRI's fifth pillar (people-to-people bond) has focused on education and tourism-related issues.

In his recently published review essay, Blanchard argues that scholarship on the BRI 'seems stuck on the road to nowhere' [Blanchard 2021]. Certainly, this is not the case in Japan. What seems to be lacking, however, is a multi-disciplinary effort to build an analytical framework that would provide a basis to fully address the scope and complexity of the BRI.

NOTES

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1 In Chinese: Tuijin "Yidai Yilu" Jianshe Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu 推进"一带一路"建设工作领导小组.

2 In Chinese: Guojia Guoji Fazhan Hezuoshu 国家国际发展合作署.

3 To the best of the author's knowledge, there have been two previous attempts to review Japanese language publications on the BRI. In January 2018, the Asian Cultures Research Institute of Toyo University published the 'Research Trends of Belt and Road Initiative'. The study offers 'a comparative literature review' of peer-reviewed articles published between 2013 and July 2017 in Japanese (13 articles), Chinese (99 articles), and English (114 articles) [Ryō R. N. 2018]. Additionally, in the *SASS Reports on the Belt and Road*, Gu Hongyan published a well-researched article on Japanese think tanks' attitudes towards the BRI [Gu 2018].

4 The term 'grey (or gray) literature' tends to be used to refer to literature which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business, and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers [Mahood, Van Eerd, and Irvin 2014: 222]. Grey literature includes theses and dissertations, conference proceedings, research and committee reports, census data, patents, and clinical trials, among others. As noted by Paez, grey literature often provides data not found within commercially published literature, reducing publication bias and facilitating a more balanced view of the evidence [Paez 2017: 234].

5 https://ci.nii.ac.jp/.

6 https://ci.nii.ac.jp/books/.

7 https://ci.nii.ac.jp/d/.

8 https://zassaku-plus.com/.

9 McGann defines 'think tanks' as 'public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy' [McGann 2020: 13]. Legally speaking, Japanese think tanks can be classified as 1) a facility established under the governmental organisations 施設等機関 (e.g. the National Institute for Defense Studies, the Policy Research Institute, etc.), 2) a national research and development agency 国立研究開発法人 (e.g. the Japan Science and Technology Agency), 3) an independent administrative institute 独立行政法人 (e.g. IDE-JETRO, RIETI, etc.), 4) a public interest incorporated foundation 公益財団法人 (e.g. the Japan Institute of International Affairs, ERINA, etc.), 5) a general incorporated association 一般社団法人 (e.g. the Japanese Institute of International Business Law), 6) a general incorporated foundation 一般財団法人 (e.g. the Institute for International Trade and Investment, the Institute of Transportation Economics, etc.), and 7) a corporate (for-profit) public policy research organisation (e.g. the Nomura Institute of Capital Markets Research, the Japan Research Institute, etc.), reflecting the different roles

those think tanks perform in Japanese society.

10 In Japanese: *kyōkai* 協会.

11 In Japanese: *mukimei* 無記名.

12 To tabulate the issue-based distribution of textual materials, chapters in four co-authored books [Shindō and Shū 2018; Boku, Jo, and Okamoto 2019; Hirakawa H. et al. 2019; Kaneko, Yamada, and Yoshino 2020] and chapters in two research paper series [Chūgoku Sōgō Kenkyū Kōryū Sentā 2016; Chūgoku Sōgō Kenkyū Sakura Saiensu Sentā 2019] are treated as separate studies, so the total number of sampled items increase to 438.

13 To tabulate the geographical distribution of textual materials, chapters in four co-authored books [Shindō and Shū 2018; Boku, Jo, and Okamoto 2019; Hirakawa H. et al. 2019; Kaneko, Yamada, and Yoshino 2020] and chapters in two research paper series [Chūgoku Sōgō Kenkyū Kōryū Sentā 2016; Chūgoku Sōgō Kenkyū Sakura Saiensu Sentā 2019] are treated as separate studies, so that the total number of sampled items increase to 438.

14 According to Dodds, 'geopolitics' involves three qualities. First, it is concerned with questions of influence and power over space and territory. Second, it uses geographical frames to make sense of world affairs. Third, geopolitics offers insights into the behavioural patterns of states because their interests are fundamentally unchanging—states need to secure resources, protect their territory, and manage their populations [Dodds 2019: 1]. 'Geoeconomics', on the other hand, can be succinctly defined as 'the geostrategic use of economic power' [Wigell 2016: 135]. In this sense, geoeconomics challenges the liberal interdependence paradigm by underscoring the strategic interests in play in economic relations between states. Both geopolitics and geoeconomics can be applied by a state as its geostrategy. Here, 'geostrategy' refers to the geographic direction of a state's foreign policy—it describes where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military and/or economic power and directing diplomatic activity [Grygiel 2011: 23].

15 In Chinese: Beidou Weixing Daohang Xitong 北斗卫星导航系统. For a detailed analysis of the DRS, see Itō A. 2020.

16 Tcf = trillion of standard cubic feet of gas.

17 The ultra-high-voltage direct current (UHVDC) transmission lines allow for clean power to be quickly distributed over huge distances.

18 For a detailed review on this topic, see Brewster 2017.

19 Among Japanese scholars, this line of interpretation is pursued by Liu [Ryū T. 2017].

20 Yamamoto Takehiko defines 'geoscience & technology' as a strategy under which a state offers strong financial support in the area of R&D activities to public research institutions and private companies, so that, via the development of new technologies, it can compete with other countries in both military and economic terms [Yamamoto T. 2002: 25].

21 The 'G-Zero' concept comes from Ian Bremmer, who penned a book in 2012 by the same name. In a nutshell, Bremmer's argument is that the

world no longer has a global leader as it did for most of the post-war period and this has given rise to a chaotic and fragmented global landscape [Bremmer 2012].

22 The phenomenon of global trade fragmentation is discussed in detail in Section 4.3. of this paper.

23 Launched in 2013, the negotiations on the TTIP were put on hold by the Trump administration at the end of 2016. A European Council decision of 15 April 2019 states that the negotiating directives for the TTIP are obsolete and no longer relevant [Council of the European Union 2019]. The TPP fared slightly better. After President Trump pulled the United States out of the TPP in January 2017, the remaining eleven members of the TPP joined the CPTPP—a somewhat abridged version of the original agreement which suspends provisions in the same areas that Washington had pushed for, but retains chapters on SOEs, government procurement, and e-commerce. The underlying logic behind such a decision was that the TTP/CPTPP would set high standards that China would eventually need to adopt or lose markets (see Manning 2020: 5–7).

24 In Chinese: zhanlüe zhidian 战略支点.

25 In Chinese: haiyang qiangguo 海洋强国.

26 For a detailed analysis, see Shen and Yu X. 2018. The term 'marine economy' is used to refer to shipping, shipbuilding, and port infrastructure industry.

27 In the process of writing of this article, on 20 September 2020, Suga Yoshihide took office as Japan's new prime minister. Little is known about Suga's attitude towards China. His premiership, however, is widely perceived as a continuation of Abe-era policies, including in the field of foreign affairs.

28 In Chinese: liangjie beiwanglu 谅解备忘录 (MoU); anpai beiwanglu 安排备忘录 (MoA); yidingshu 议定书 (protocol); lianhe shengming 联合声明 (joint statement).

29 A detailed account of the establishment of the ICCs is offered by Wang [Ō Sosei 2019].

30 In Chinese: xibu dakaifa 西部大开发. During the 1990s, it became clear that China's uneven growth pattern would pose a serious challenge to the Communist Party's monopoly on power. To remedy the situation, in 1999, the government announced the WRDS. Key components of the WRDS included: 1) the economic development of the frontier regions, 2) the elimination of regional disparities, 3) the consolidation of the unity of the ethnic groups, 4) the strengthening of border security and social stability, and 5) the promotion of social progress. Intellectual justification of the Strategy came from the report written by academics Hu Angang, Wang Shaoguang, and Kang Xiaoguang [Hu, Wang S., and Kang 1995], which highlighted the adverse impact of the PRC's post-1978 reform and opening-up policies on the frontier regions' development. Following the 2008 Lhasa protests and the 2009 Urumqi riots, the Work Conference on the

WRDS was held in Beijing on 5–6 July 2010. President Hu Jintao used his conference speech to unveil the WRDS New Policy 新一轮西部大开发, pledging comprehensive economic development, environmental protection, and upgrading of people's living standards over the next ten years. As can be seen from the above brief outline, the BRI is a *de facto* third stage of China's WRDS.

31 Although the SPC's opinions do not have the force of law, they nevertheless indicate the government's priorities and signal shifts in position on legal issues.

32 European stakeholders' response to the BRI has been scattered. Some EU members have already signed the MoUs, while several Western European states (including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain) refuse to officially participate in the initiative.

33 In Chinese: kuajing jingji hezuoqu 跨境经济合作区. At present, the only fully-operational CBECZ is the China-Kazakhstan Khorgos Border Cooperation Center 中国-哈萨克斯霍尔果斯国际边境合作中心. The 11 CBECZs under construction include Manzhouli, Erlianhaote, Suifenhe, Heihe, and Hunchun in China's Northeast, and Ruili, Mohan, Hekou, Dongxing, Pingxiang, and Longbang along the border with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam.

34 In Chinese: diqu jingji yitihua 地区经济一体化.

35 China's northeast covers three provinces: Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Once the 'cradle of China's industrialisation', the proportion of the region's industrial output as a share of the national total has been in steady decline over the last thirty years. In 2003, the Hu-Wen administration initiated the process of 'revitalisation of the northeast old industrial base' 振兴东北老工业基地, focusing on structural adjustments such as the SOEs restructuring and industrial redistribution. In 2016, the State Council issued the 'Several Opinions on the Comprehensive Revitalisation of the Old Industrial Bases Including Northeast China'. The document identifies key tasks of the revitalisation strategy in the BRI era: 1) the improvement of infrastructure, 2) the promotion of structural adjustment, 3) the government's support for innovation and entrepreneurship, and 4) the improvement of people's living standards [Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang Weiyuanhui and Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guowuyuan 2016].

36 In Chinese: Zhong'ou banlie 中欧班列.

37 For a detailed analysis, see Manning 2020.

38 Nedopil Wang's report combines two sets of data: the MOFCOM's database on BRI investment projects and the American Enterprise Institute's 'China Global Investment Tracker 2020'.

39 In Chinese: ziyou maoyi shiyanqu 自由贸易试验区.

40 In Chinese: ziyou maoyigang 自由贸易港.

41 The problem with the GDPC's dataset is that it focuses solely on lending commitments from China's two policy banks (the EXIM and the CDB), while excluding commercial banks' loans as well as mixed loans co-fi-

nanced by the EXIM/CDB. As noted by Mingey and Kratz, the GDPC's methodological choices leave observers with 'a distorted view China's outbound lending' [Mingey and Kratz 2021]. To complicate the situation further, there is no global dataset that fully covers China's commercial bank loans.

42 The term 'debt trap diplomacy' was coined by the Indian geostrategist Brahma Chellaney, who asserted that the aim of the BRI was to saddle small nations with debt they could not hope to repay, leaving them 'under China's thumb' [Chellaney 2017]. For a robust challenge to the 'debt trap diplomacy' thesis, see Jones and Hameiri 2020.

43 See, for example, Kley 2020.

44 Rhodium Group database shows that, between 2014 and 2019, there were 22 cases of China's loan renegotiations. As of 2019, the amount of renegotiated loans stood at USD 63 billion, amounting to 16–20 % of China's outward lending [Kratz, Rosen, and Mingey 2020].

45 In Chinese: Sichouzhilu Jiangxuejin 丝绸之路奖学金.

46 In Chinese: Sichouzhilu Jiaoshi Jiaoyu Lianmeng 丝绸之路教师教育联盟.

47 https://www.cief.org.cn/qq.

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