



China's Rise and Reach: The Belt and Road City

September 22, 2021

9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. CT

Virtual Workshop

BACKGROUND

The maturation of China as a great power and the increased economic and demographic importance of cities will be two of the defining developments in international political economy in the twenty-first century. China's rise over the last three decades is, in part, an urban story, with internal migration playing a crucial role in its economic and social development. Looking forward, migration to, from, and between cities will continue to shape China's political stability, social resilience, and economic innovation and strength going forward.

But these internal developments are only part of the story of China as a global power. It also seeks influence in urban spaces beyond its borders, doing so in new and unique ways, all the while influencing local economic dynamics, metropolitan development patterns, and built design. With a new system of regional and global political and economic influence coalescing around the Belt and Road Initiative, it is time to consider the nascent characteristics of the Belt and Road City. Great powers and hegemonies have long sought to influence the shape and scale of cities far beyond their borders. The twenty-first century is no different. Successful powers in this century will build stable and innovative cities at home while projecting influence, and at times military strength, in urban settings and life worlds abroad. When considered in relation to emerging political narratives in China which seek to reconceptualize China's place in the world, the BRI has the potential to significantly reshape the international order, repositioning China at the heart of a web of global influence.

Just as the form of "global city" that developed in the late twentieth century was a product of a historically distinctive set of relations between international system, state, city, and market, so now does the emerging Belt and Road City have the potential to signal a very different set of these relations in the early to mid-twenty-first century. The cities along the routes of the BRI will take new forms, drawing their shape, morphology, and disposition from the distinctive forms of Chinese political economy emerging in the contemporary moment, and in the interaction of these logics with domestic regional politics and histories. Belt and Road Cities are likely to shape the patterns of globalization in the twenty-first century, making an understanding of their dynamics and effects vital.

This session is part of the Great Powers and Urbanization Project, a collaborative research initiative between the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House, the University of Melbourne's Connected Cities Lab, the Barcelona Centre for International Relations (CIDOB), the Argentine Council for International Relations (Consejo Argentino para los Relaciones Internacionales), and the African Centre for Cities. The project evaluates potential ways to construct foreign policies, reform global governance, and represent stakeholders in an era of both geopolitical competition and urbanization.

AGENDA

Wednesday, September 22, 2021, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. CT

Opening Remarks (5 minutes)

Opening Briefs (40 minutes)

Brief I: Urbanization, Internal Migration, and the Rise of China (20 minutes)

Juan Du, Dean, Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, the University of Toronto

Brief II: Global Cities and Global Order (20 minutes)

Simon Curtis, Senior Lecturer, International Politics, the University of East Anglia

Session I: Cities, Infrastructure Development, and International Order (60 minutes)

Panel

- Moderator: Simon Curtis, Senior Lecturer, International Policy, the University of East Anglia
- Andrea Pollio, Research Fellow, African Centre for Cities
- Maximilian Mayer, Junior-Professor of International Relations and Global Politics of Technology at University of Bonn
- Eyck Freymann, Balliol College, University of Oxford

Material infrastructure informs and sustains different forms of world order. This session will investigate the manner in which the BRI's infrastructure projects are underpinning 21st century political order across Asia, Europe, and even Latin America and Africa, and how the types of technological systems developed and materialized through infrastructure construction are tied to particular ideologies and narratives. Alongside the infrastructure construction projects, the BRI incorporates new institutions and mechanisms with which to finance them, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which now operates alongside the work of the new US\$40 billion Silk Road Fund and that of the big domestic Chinese Policy Banks such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank. The BRI also brings in its wake attempts to develop new ideas about financial markets, currency, standards, legal systems, digital technologies, economic models, and forms of urbanism, which especially focus on the role of Economic Corridors and Special Economic Zones. In addition, the role of digital technologies will be critical to the forms that the Belt and Road Cities will take, both inside and outside China, where Chinese technological developments in smart cities, facial recognition, AI, and autonomous vehicles will all contribute to yield specific urban morphologies, both within Chinese territory and beyond.

However, in the contemporary world, no one state has the power to shape world order alone. Even great powers such as China cannot control the emerging form of a large technical system of the scope of the BRI. As such, this pillar will also examine the range and interactions of other actors, including non-state actors, international institutions and other states involved in transnational infrastructure projects tied to the BRI. It will examine how new political narratives have emerged in China as it seeks to exert transnational influence after decades of rising within the framework of Western led global order. These include the 'China Dream',

the revival of the concept of Tianxia, and emerging relational theories of International Relations. What is the relationship between these emerging visions of world order, which are very different from the Westphalian ideals of autonomy and individualism, and the relationships and material infrastructures being forged along the Belt and Road?

Break (10 minutes)

Session II: The Reach of China - Urban Planning, Design, and Diplomacy (60 minutes)

Panel

- Moderator: Xuefei Ren, Associate Professor, Faculty of Sociology & Global Urban Studies, Michigan State University
- Thomas Hussey, Director, Urban Design and Planning, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill
- Julie Miao, Senior Lecturer in Property and Economic Development in the Melbourne School of Design, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning
- Xiangming Chen, Distinguished Professor of Global Urban Studies and Sociology, Trinity College
- Timothy Summers, Assistant Professor in the Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

The unprecedented urban development in mainland China has included a number of approaches, including the use of SEZs, the building of CBDs in advance of evident demand; the destruction of historical buildings; the deployment of monotonous design; the application of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, automation, and big data to urbanization.

The Global City emerged alongside the rise of finance, financial services, and the intermediary relationships needed to further such exchange. Alternative and newer versions of global cities have been predicated on innovation, clusters, and the key concept of the economic corridor. More so than these other models, BRI Cities appear to prioritize infrastructure, supply chain management, legal zoning techniques and connectivity. To what extent is China attempting to construct an alternative set of institutions to the Bretton Woods institutions, with initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and how does this relate to the emerging urban forms and infrastructural systems? What developmental models arise from Chinese State Capitalism, and how are they driving transformation in the global economy? Meanwhile, if the BRI seeks to expand connectivity and influence, it seeks to do so, in theory, not only through finance and infrastructure, but also culture. The Pudong development in Shanghai seeks to be a symbol of Chinese culture and progress not only domestically, but abroad as well. And past models of globalization have included significant informal influence through culture and media.

Conclusion and Summary (5 minutes)