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Isha Tripathi
Research Scholar,
Department of Political
Science, VSSD College,
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Analyzing the Chinese narrative of new international relations in the context of belt road initiative (BRI)

Isha Tripathi

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Abstract

The paper has analyzed the narrative of a new kind of international relations that China has proposed as an alternative to the currently prevalent west dominated world order, through an analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The argument posited is that there is a clear divorce between China's words and actions, and that there is a visible, fundamental similarity with that which it seeks to oppose or replace in the global order.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Narrative, New International Relations, China, Superpower syndrome

Introduction

Narratives play a key role in the realm of international relations wherein every major actor tries to influence the dominant global narrative to align it with its own interests and world view. The paper discusses the centrality of narrative to global politics, and lays out the key features of Chinese narrative of new international relations in the context of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI has been focused upon to understand the issue at hand because this project is a tangible manifestation of China's foreign policy. Since its launch in 2013, it has become the nucleus around which Beijing's international relations have revolved and evolved. As such, it is possible to grasp the nature and evolution of Beijing's foreign policy by focusing on this initiative, instead of grappling with humongous field of Chinese international relations. The narrative fidelity of China's discourse on new kind of international relations is then analyzed, which brings forth the conclusion that there is a fundamental similarity between this new kind of international relations and that which it sought to replace. It also draws attention to the dearth of alternative narratives in international relations.

Importance of narrative in IR

In the simplest of words, narrative is the art of storytelling. In systemic studies, narrative is understood as a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of values. Alternatively understood as discourse, *John Walsh* explains that discourse define 'what can be said' and exclude other ideas. Thus, it has the ability to shape truth. The post-structuralist school of thought argues that it is the discourse that shapes reality, not the other way round. Each narrative or discourse has the element of tacit consent as to what is considered normal or appropriate in terms of thought, speech and action ^[1]. Patterson and Monroe understand narrative as how disparate facts are constructed and weaved together cognitively to make sense of reality, and since narratives help in shaping our political reality, it becomes important to understand it to gain a better understanding of political behaviour ^[2].

Walter Fisher argued for a Narrative paradigm over Rational one. Instead of assuming that the individuals are primarily rational beings, the narrative paradigm posits that they are basically storytellers who understand the world or the reality around them not so much through logic and reason, as through building narratives. Fisher posits that the two defining characteristics of a narrative are narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence refers to the internal consistency of a story, and narrative fidelity refers to the extent to which the stories are in congruence with the observers' experiences ^[3].

Corresponding Author:
Isha Tripathi
Research Scholar,
Department of Political
Science, VSSD College,
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Leaders, nations, politicians make use of narrative to reach out to the people or audience. A good story which people can relate to, can inspire people into taking and/or supporting desired actions. Where logical arguments cannot persuade a person, a story or narrative that 'makes-sense' can prove convincing. Heuristics dominate decision making in everyday lives of most people.

Narratives play an important role in international politics. While it is true that several contradictory as well as complimentary narratives exist at the same time, some are more dominant, widely accepted, or more normalized than others. While the inherent merits of the narratives are vital in deciding how much currency a narrative can gain, power dynamics is the biggest influencing factor. Inadvertently (or advertently), the more powerful, resource-rich countries are able to set a dominant narrative that suits their needs and aids in maintaining the status quo which puts them in this deciding position. What issues will be considered important for wider discussions, what language will be utilized to address a concern, etc. are central to the conduct of international politics. The White Man's burden and Civilizing mission are examples of how narratives are used to justify status quo by the powerful. USA has repeatedly demonstrated dexterity in making use of narratives to back its foreign policy decisions, such as the 'Global War on Terror' and 'War on drugs' which were utilized to gain footholds in the Middle-East. Narrative building is a conscious policy tool that is used at various levels for fulfilment of national interests.

Every major shift in international relations is preceded and followed by a change in the existing narrative. Therefore, in order to truly understand the ebb and flow of global politics, it is important to understand the dynamics of the narratives in the sphere. Incidents and statements that might appear unconnected and incoherent make sense when the observer has cognizance of the broader narrative. With better comprehension of narrative and counter-narrative, it becomes possible to predict how certain actors will behave in the time to come.

China's narrative of new international relations

For many decades since its establishment, the People's Republic of China followed Deng Xiaoping's policy advice to 'lay low, never take the lead, and bide your time.' But things changed since Xi Jinping took the rein of presidency in 2013. China has since then enhanced its involvement in world affairs, and BRI is the culmination of this change in approach. Even before the launch of BRI, Chinese official policy documents were already using a different language and tone, which was indicative of the change in the self-perception of the Chinese with regards to the role they saw themselves playing on the global stage. For example- a quick view of the China Defense White Papers from 1995 to 2019 compiled by Andrew S. Erickson shows remarkable change in the language being used and the issues being addressed in these official documents [4]. The 1995 paper stressed on the spirit of disarmament and showcased economic development as their top priority. The 2013 Defence White Paper shows a marked shift in that it opens by addressing 'New situations, New challenges and New missions'. The 2019 paper then opens with phrases most commonly associated with the BRI- community with a shared future, development, win-win cooperation. It states that the dreams of the Chinese people are linked with the

dreams of people world over. Chinese armed force is a force for world peace and stability, and for building of a community for shared future for mankind. Protecting China's overseas interests is stated as being one of the main missions of the Chinese armed forces. The change from stress on internal economic development to building world community with common future is stark.

Baohui Zhang argues that this change in approach is showcased in five areas - the pursuit of full partnership with the United States of America; a rising tendency of soft-balancing in great power relations; efforts to re-shape the orders of various regions of the world, even those that are outside China's natural geographical purview, such as Africa; a global economic security strategy; and the pursuit of soft power, a mixture of economic diplomacy and cultural and ideological appeals, to promote China's global and regional influence [5].

Out of the many works on BRI produced from China and/or by Chinese authors, speeches by high-ranking Chinese officials, etc that have been pursued by the researcher it was observed that there is a remarkable degree of similarity in the arguments put forth, the terminology used, and an overall perception of affairs. There is a constant repetition of words like 'win-win cooperation', 'community of common destiny', 'partnership on equal footing', 'new era in international relations', 'shared benefits', 'genuine multilateralism' etc. The constant line of argument being pursued in all of these works is that unlike the West's self-centered approach to national interests, China realizes that the ultimate long-term fulfilment of its national interests is dependent on the well-being of the other countries. Therefore, it seeks to share its prosperity and development-related wisdom with other developing or lesser/least developed nations.

Benjamin Tze Ern Ho in his essay Chinese thinking about International Relations, in Asia Policy argues that Chinese international relations scholars have recently began advocating a "Chinese way" of thinking about international relations, and that traditional Chinese ideas should be incorporated in it. Ho further states that this shift in scholarship is happening within a larger framework of perceived Chinese self-identity that is in tension, if not in opposition, with Western conceptions of self, society, and statehood [6].

Weidong Liu and Michael Dunford write that China's Belt and Road Initiative draws meanings from the Ancient Silk Road and calls for an open and inclusive, mutually beneficial model of cooperative economic, political and cultural exchanges by establishing new, open multilateral financial frameworks that can ensure benefit sharing with poorer or emerging countries. BRI seeks to lay the infrastructural and industrial foundations that can secure China's relations with participating countries [7]. In the Chinese Journal of International Law, Zeng Lingliang takes this line of argument further to state that the implication of the Belt and Road surpasses both regional integration and partnership because the very basis as well as the first priority of this initiative is a far-reaching view of building a regional community of common destiny. The aim is to build a community of shared interests, shared destiny and a community of shared responsibility. He equates the destiny of this community with the destiny of entire mankind [8].

China's approach to international relations, as they portray it to be, is marked by some important departures from this

present state of affairs dominated by USA and its allies. First, it highlights the stress on multipolarity as against US-polarity. Beijing has been at the forefront of the global North versus global South debate, and it has played its self-assigned role of being the leader of the developing world countries enthusiastically. BRI is slated as a manifestation of this emphasis on multi-polarity as it challenges the developed world's dominance over international trade routes and trade related infrastructure by creating alternative routes, infrastructures, and finance and development related institutions. In this way the dependency of the developing world over the developed world reduces.

Second, its emphasis on non-interference in internal matters of other states. Because China staunchly resists even the slightest interventions in its domestic issues, it constantly advocates the same treatment of other countries as well. This policy line is stressed to show a clear diversion from the interventionist foreign policy favored by USA. The War on Terror pretext used to intervene in Iraq, Afghanistan and other similar acts portray America in the image of a bully. Meddling with sovereignty also happens at a much subtle level when, for example, development projects funded by the global north are accompanied by demands for changes in economic and political structures of a country in need of funds. Participation in the development projects of BRI requires no such demands. Democracy or not, liberal society or not, China is willing to embrace them all as partners in this grand vision.

Third, the Chinese narrative calls for creating fairer financial regimes. As an important part of the Chinese narrative of 'new' international relations, the need for egalitarian and fairer financial structures and institutions in the international realm is constantly underscored. The currently dominant global economic structure is explained using Immanuel Wallerstein's World System theory which posits that the system is a hierarchy of core, semi-periphery, and periphery, wherein the developed west forms the core of the global system. The prosperity of the core depends on maintain exploitative relations with the developing and least developed nations at semi-periphery and periphery. The financial regime as it is at present is geared towards the goal of integrating the maximum number of countries into the capitalist economic system. Definite efforts are made to open the developing nations' fledgling markets for free trade. Financial crisis in a country is used to push forth market reforms and suitable political changes. For example, key lending institutions like IMF and World Bank impose several conditions on the borrowing state before extending loans, and these preconditions are geared towards making the borrower nation more liberal-democratic, more integrated with the capitalist world economic system.

At one level the BRI is supposed to provide the developing world with a solution to this predicament by integrating the poorer countries with alternative supply chains through development of infrastructure, and alternative avenues for development financing. Enhanced connectivity will be followed by an enhanced flow of goods, capital and technology which will empower the weaker nations on their path to development. Through alternate financial institutions like the Silk Road Fund, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Belt and Road Special Lending Scheme, etc. it is argued that China is lending economic voice to the smaller countries which otherwise have no say in the setting of rules of the international financial system^[9]. In China Leadership

Monitor, Swaine in his paper titled Chinese views and commentary on the One Belt, One Road Initiative observes that as per several Chinese scholars, this project has caused a restructuring of the global financial system which involves a movement away from the harsh requirements and interference with the internal affairs and sovereignty of applicant countries that are said to characterize the Western-dominated Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, toward a more egalitarian and fair, less ideological and more inclusive financial structure oriented more toward "a community of shared interests"^[10].

Fourth, the Chinese narrative has underscored the importance of cooperation in international relations instead of creating domination. Beijing has pressed forth the narrative of the contradistinction between partnerships for mutual development which are marked by cooperation as against the characteristically 'ruler-ruled' tinged exploitative interactions of the west-dominant international regime. As the Chinese spokespersons keep stating, the BRI is a project which is based on the principle of partnership on equal footing. This is very different from the development projects usually initiated by the West. Their projects are marked by an inequality- the divide between the rich and the poor countries is reflected in the terms of agreements of these projects and there is no equal partnership but domination-subjugation relationship.

Fifth, it contrasts responsible development against exploitative development. Most of the major issues faced by the world today are direct results of self-centered and short-sighted development trajectory undertaken by the developed world. The existential threat caused by climate change is a gift of uncontrolled industrial and urban expansion. Even at present, there is a huge and powerful lobby in the developed world that downplays the dire situation of climate change and global warming. The Chinese narrative of development is sufficiently aware of the need to address environmental concerns associated with large-scale development. To quote Xi speaking at the Second Belt and Road Forum – "it aims to promote green development. We may launch green infrastructure projects, make green investment and provide green financing to protect the Earth which we all call home." Chinese experts claim on international forums that since the beginning of the BRI, the Chinese government has issued detailed guidelines for Chinese companies to promote green and sustainable development^[11, 12].

It must be understood here as to what necessitated such sustained efforts from China into building its own narratives on the international stage. In a nutshell, it can be stated that the need for an alternative global narrative stem from China's dream of national rejuvenation of the country as the Middle Kingdom, and finds fertile ground in the shortcomings of the currently dominant liberal democratic global order. If the narrative is convincing, it will find more takers. As it finds more support, it becomes louder and thus, the parent country of the narrative gains influence in world politics, and tangible benefits start following this influence. *Joseph Nye* has most aptly stated – Proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states. Soft power lies in the capacity to shape others' preferences by setting the framework of debate. It lends legitimacy to foreign policy decisions and goals, and this legitimacy reduces resistance from others in a way coercive or hard power cannot attain. To a large extent, the BRI has

been a text-book example this use of co-optive power to gain followers^[13]. Besides, narratives are meant not only for the international audience, but also for the domestic populace.

For China, the narrative-building function has become especially vital because it is struck with the Superpower Syndrome, due to which, Beijing finds it necessary to counter the current hegemon USA at all fronts i.e., economy, strategy, technology and ideology. As Sharma and Khatri opine, the BRI has been put forward to institutionalize China's soft power presence in the world and create harmony with rest of the world^[14]. Samuel Huntington had observed that a superpower has to stand for an idea with appeal beyond its borders. In the New Silk Road, China is presenting a similar idea, guised as a partnership, around which it can rally support of multiple countries and this cohort will obviously be led by China.

Problems in the Chinese narrative- BRI or OBOR?

When launched in 2013, the initiative was christened as One Belt One Road (OBOR). The initial hesitancy of other countries in taking up the project was often expressed as the project being one belt and one road - owned by one country. To overcome this image, Beijing renamed OBOR as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017. The new name is not as readily associable with hegemonic tendencies as the former. However, it is hard to say that this rechristening is reflective of any change in the essential nature of this initiative. *Walter Fisher's* requirements of Narrative coherence and Narrative fidelity which are crucial to the acceptance of a narrative with the audiences are missing from the Chinese narrative. Since the launch of the BRI, a mismatch between what is being said in words, and what is visible on ground has attracted attention.

First, the promise of win-win cooperation is under question mark. BRI is pushing forth China's expansionist geo-political agenda. Secondly, it is putting China in a commanding position in highly interdependent world economy. Third, China literally sends its own labour to implement projects which means there is no real job creation in the host country. Often this is followed by placement of some of its security forces to protect the Chinese projects and workers as it did in Pakistan with the CPEC, Zambia's copper mines, and other places. Fourth, there is an obvious bias in awarding of contracts to Chinese companies. Fifth, heavy loans are granted for grand projects that end up being White elephant projects, leaving the host nation in debt and with no economic boost. Sixth, the infamous debt-trap diplomacy is used to gain unfair advantages like in cases of Maldives, Sri Lanka, Venezuela and others. It has a direct impact on decision making by the governments in these countries. For instance, post the inflow of Chinese capital, the Dalai Lama was not allowed to visit South Africa. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed has openly called the BRI as 'a new version of colonialism' and has compared deals with China with unequal treaties forced by Britain on China after the opium war^[15]. Moreover, Chinese economy is facing the problem of surplus capital and relatively low domestic demands. The BRI provides them with fresh markets as well as new sources of raw material for more production. It opens avenues for new investments. This is remarkably similar to the colonial railways built to extract raw material for industries from the interiors of the colonies and flood their

markets with final goods industrially produced. There is no responsibility towards the adverse impact on environment, human rights and corruption.

Second break in narrative fidelity is observed in the claims of partnerships on equal footing. Sentiments like brotherhood, friendship, etc. are proclaimed to be the hallmark of Chinese way of international relations. But the incongruency of this with its actual behavior is undeniable. It has shown a definite taste for bullying other countries, especially those which have entered into a relationship of economic dependency with it. Increasing number of incidents are being reported where Chinese diplomats have crossed lines in overzealous display of country loyalty. Chinese students and tourists abroad also display arrogance. In the online magazine China File, a Chinese businessman was quoted saying about Cambodia that they are so backward that if the Chinese didn't create jobs for them, they could only afford to eat a mango per day. China's burgeoning relations with Australia also dismantled because of this arrogant attitude on part of China. The Chinese's egotistical attitude has been regularly stirring outrage among the local populations such as in Cambodia, Zambia and Kenya^[16].

Third incongruency in narrative and practice is observable in China's express desire for enhancing mutual learning between civilizations. The mutual learning claim is contradicted at two points by the Chinese establishment itself. First, especially since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping to power, China has displayed a superiority complex in that it is constantly stressed that they are one of the oldest civilization in the world, and their wisdom has the cure to all woes of the modern world. Convinced of own unsurpassable superiority, the doors to mutual learning close themselves. Second, authoritarian regimes survive through coercive control over its subject at both physical and mental levels. Through careful handling of what is communicated with and amongst the people, consent for coercive rule is manufactured. Any idea that falls out of the state's control is perceived as threat. This threat perception would explain the atrocities inflicted on the practitioners of Falun Gong. The release of the Document 9 in 2013 was followed by a crackdown on thinkers, academics, media etc. The document considers promotion of universal values as threat to theoretical foundations of party leadership, media should be subject to party discipline, public opinion needs to be purified, etc. it basically asks for complete insulation of Chinese society from 'Western' values^[17]. Communist China perceives a threat to its existence from liberal values. Elizabeth Economy has highlighted that this threat perception has become more and more acute since Xi has assumed leadership. She points that at an event in 2013 he had stated that the first and the most vital line of defense is at the level of ideology. If ideology is questioned, everything else will unravel automatically^[18]. Such a state of affairs leaves no space for mutual learning among civilizations.

The last and most obvious divergence is Beijing's insistence on non-interference in internal matters and respecting sovereignty. Nothing could be farther from truth than China's claim that it respects other nation's sovereignty. The CPEC is a blatant violation of India's sovereignty. Beijing has supplied Taliban with arms against the Afghan government. It has exerted its weight for meddling with Nepal's politics. It is accused of helping the toppling of the

democratic regime in Myanmar and Bolivia. At different times, it has pressured South Africa and Mongolia into cancelling events organized for the Dalai Lama. It is practically controlling Pakistan like a vassal state. At a subtler level, it has made heavy investments in educational and media institutions in several countries and has used this investment as leverage to influence what is being published there.

New international relations?

China's foreign policy is, to a large extent, showing tendencies similar to capitalist expansionist countries of present and past. The BRI has been called out for its neo-imperialist nature, and China is acting very much like an imperialist state. The initiative is essentially imperialism disguised as connectivity. The fundamentals of China's emergence as a contender for superpower status are similar to the European imperialism. It is characterized by expansion with no definite limit, becomes a matter of national prestige, fuelled by economic motive, dominating the weaker players, and guising of this hegemony as humanitarian or civilizing effort. BRI started out as a revival of the ancient Silk Road connecting Asia and Europe in the form of Euro-Asia Continental Bridge. Now it has expanded to include Africa and even Latin America. The ancient Silk Road thrived during the Han and Tang dynasties which are periods that the Chinese associate with strength, territorial unity, flourishing trade and cultural inclusiveness. It is therefore perceived as a sign of China's return to the prosperity, and strength associated with that period. All this while, China continues to stress the benevolence of the initiative. The Chinese diplomats try to dismiss suspicions by saying that China does not play 'little geopolitical games'. Much like the Europeans shouldered the White man's burden the Chinese want to share the benefits of their development with their lesser fortunate neighbors and benefit the entire human community.

BRI is not as benevolent an initiative as the Chinese narrative presents it as being, but Beijing is pushing forth with the storyline nonetheless. Huge amounts are invested in producing appropriate literature, movies, exhibitions etc. which support this narrative. Lavish large scale international events are organized to prove that most of the world wants to partner with China. Communist China literally 'creates' history to suit its needs. For example, to support its oceanic ambitions and the Maritime Silk Road, China has rediscovered Zheng He as a great naval admiral who heroically established China as a great naval force. This remodeling of facts is not limited within borders, China also exerts pressure on other countries to not deviate from its version of facts. For example, in 2020, it pressured a French Museum, in Nantes in France, to censor an exhibition on Genghis Khan ^[19]. Because communist China wishes homogenization of the Chinese society, it seeks to eliminate any minority culture, one of which is that of its Mongol population in inner Mongolia. So, the Chinese authorities disrupted an event in France because it talked about the Mongol Empire.

China has tried to create an alternative narrative in international politics in an attempt to lay claim at the leadership of the world. China is afflicted with the superpower syndrome which is compelling it to prove itself worthier than USA at all fronts be it intellectual, technology, military, economy or any other. Xi's extremely ambitious

personality is also a driving factor here. In his desire to be treated at par with Mao, to be deified in his country, he has to offer pearls of wisdom which can cement him as the worthiest leader of China and the world.

Whether this Chinese narrative has gained any currency at international stage or not, and how far has it succeeded in remodeling the ways of conducting international relations is a subject matter of further research. But it is true that there is a vacuum created by the flaws of the existing world system. Alternative ways of perceiving and managing global politics are conspicuously absent. As has been explained above, China's narrative of new international relations is in fact the same old story of unending expansion, and hypocritical lip service to human values. Perhaps this is a junction in time where humanity as a whole really needs to wake up to the fact that the normal way of being is in fact quite abnormal - a species working towards its own extinction while knowing that it is doing so, and unable to stop simply because of being used to a way of life that only became the norm two centuries ago. Or maybe humans need a jolt bigger than the Wuhan virus pandemic. The central most question that has eternally engaged thinkers and philosophers is- how to define prosperity and happiness. Both American and Chinese outlooks ultimately root the fulfilment of happiness in creation of wealth. So long as the contradiction between the limits of earth as resource and limitless expansionist industrialization dependent prosperity is not addressed and dealt with, existential crisis is inevitable.

Conclusion

In the complex arena of international relations, narratives wield immense power, shaping perceptions, policies, and alliances. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as a focal point for understanding Beijing's evolving narrative of global engagement. Anchored in notions of mutual prosperity and shared destiny, China's narrative seeks to challenge Western hegemony and promote a multipolar world order. However, discrepancies between rhetoric and reality raise questions about the fidelity of this narrative. While China portrays the BRI as a benevolent endeavor, concerns persist regarding debt-trap diplomacy, unequal partnerships, and geopolitical ambitions. Moreover, Beijing's assertive actions undermine its professed commitment to non-interference and mutual learning. Despite these challenges, China's narrative resonates with nations seeking alternatives to the prevailing Western-centric model. As the global community navigates this shifting landscape, critical examination of narratives is essential for understanding power dynamics and fostering genuine cooperation in an interconnected world.

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