China and the Islamic World: How the New Silk Road is Transforming Global Politics

By Robert R. Bianchi

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The opinions expressed in this review represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.
Chinese President Xi Jinping first announced the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), also known as “the New Silk Road” and “One Belt and One Road,” in his official visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013. The BRI includes multiple overland routes connecting China with Europe through the Middle East and Eurasia, designated “the Silk Road Economic Belt,” along with a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” More details of this initiative were announced in an Action Plan in 2015 and it is still an ongoing project contingent upon regional and global developments. The BRI aims to integrate China’s economic progress with that of countries in Central Asia, West Asia, Europe, South East Asia and Africa through six “Silk Road” corridors by planning and financing the means of infrastructure, transportation, and energy. The Action Plan introduces five priorities for the implementation of the BRI: policy coordination, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonding.

In China and the Islamic World: How the New Silk Road is Transforming Global Politics, Robert R. Bianchi examines how the BRI affects politics, economics, and society in representative Muslim-majority countries and in China. Chapters devoted to Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, and Egypt show the impacts of the BRI partnership on various aspects of these countries, even including presidential and municipal elections. At the same time, Bianchi discusses the potential effects of the BRI on China, arguing that it will challenge the Chinese leadership in many respects, including compelling them to be more democratic and transparent in their governance at home. Bianchi accordingly notes that the BRI will ultimately force China to change itself as it integrates more with other countries (5). “What happens on the New Silk Road does not stay there—sooner or later it comes home and stirs the pots in cities, towns, and villages from Kashghar to Hong Kong and everywhere in-between” (8). Yet, the BRI is a part of China’s foreign diplomacy and China certainly does not expect the BRI to lead to any domestic changes, thereby potentially causing public discontent in China. In other words, the Chinese leadership is “daring and imaginative in foreign relations, but timid and paralyzed in domestic governance” (11) and extremely wary of influences from outside; their two-sided statecraft is contradictory.

The book’s eleven chapters consist of six case studies of examining Muslim-majority countries as named above, two introductory chapters, and three chapters of reflection on the implementation of the BRI in these countries. Examining each Muslim-majority country in the book, Bianchi consistently demonstrates how China is being challenged through the implementation of BRI projects. He accordingly raises the question of why China is taking what he understands to be unpredictable risks with the BRI and his simple answer is that China remains naive to the complexity of the world. China has not made a serious effort to understand the societies and cultures of the countries which it connects by building railways, ports, and roads. The six case studies corroborate the idea that “[t]he more one thinks about the New Silk Road, the more it looks like folly—certain to generate so many headaches for China’s rulers that it hardly seems worth the effort. Why would a dreary club of party bosses and bureaucrats embrace so much unpredictability?” (16-17).

Bianchi notes that the six Muslim-majority countries in the book present many geographical, political, ethnic, and religious differences and each brings distinct challenges to China in the implementation of BRI projects. Turkey has a diverse social structure amounting to “three disjointed societies—each pulling in a different direction internationally and culturally—” which makes China hesitant to strengthen its relations with Turkey (61-62). Turkish people’s kinship with Uyghurs further aggravates mistrust between the two countries (53-55). Indonesia has a visible Chinese diaspora along with widespread anti-Chinese sentiments, thereby straining the relationship between the two countries (65-69). Iran’s history with revolutions and conflicts with regional and global powers make it diplomatically troublesome for China (80-81). In its relationship to Nigeria, China needs to be more cautious not to trigger memories of colonialism and imperialism in managing the BRI projects. In Egypt, the stumbling economy and unstable polity have made China reluctant to make the country a central route in the BRI.

The case studies in the book show that China will encounter a great number of unforeseen challenges, such as internal conflicts and competition among BRI partners. Bianchi demonstrates that China was unaware of the complexity of local politics and interest groups involved with BRI partners. In implementing the BRI, China has come to realise that there are multiple actors in each country regarding political ideology,
The BRI is the signature policy of Xi Jinping and central to China’s foreign diplomacy and international economic strategy. Bianchi examines how BRI projects affect global politics, with a particular focus on the six Muslim-majority countries. The effects of the BRI go beyond these countries because of regional and global issues directly linked to them, such as China’s construction of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan in competition with India’s partnership with Iran to renovate the Chabahar Port. Bianchi also analyses how challenges will emanate from the different economic, political, and social structures of China and its BRI partners (8). For example, due to the diverse ethnic make-up of Pakistani society, China needs to keep transparency and equity in BRI projects, while in Egypt, China remains hesitant to invest because of social uprisings and an unstable political structure with a long history of dictatorship. Explaining the relationship between China and Turkey, Bianchi highlights socio-political and economic hurdles between the two countries to carry their diplomatic relationship to the next level (53-62). Bianchi also notes that “Turkey is far too strong and wilful to enter into [a] tributary” relationship and it “would reject even a fraction of the tutelage that Beijing is practicing in Islamabad” (52).

One of the important contributions of this book is to examine China’s and the BRI partners’ objectives with the BRI. Bianchi shows how the Muslim-majority countries’ interests in, expectations from, and concerns about the BRI conflict with each other and become troublesome for China. Bianchi notes that “[i]t is easier for Chinese engineers to tunnel through mountains and connect far-flung ports than for Beijing’s diplomats to contend with Iran’s designs in the Middle East or Indonesia’s determination to control its internal waterways” (140-141). For example, China and Egypt have different plans for the Suez Canal because the Canal is a national treasure for Egypt while it is “a costly tollgate with diminishing value and rising risks” for China (114-117). Similarly, Turkey, Iran, and Indonesia each aspire to be regional powers and see the BRI as a means to accomplish their ambitions. Bianchi notes that the other countries “plan to influence China at least as much as China influences them” (147).

Bianchi’s continual use of the terms “the Islamic world” and “the Muslim world” obscures the geographic, intellectual, and political diversity of Muslims. The designation of the countries examined in the book as such contradicts with the analysis presented because Islam is not the determining factor in the six countries’ relationship with China. Despite the book’s analytical focus on Muslim-majority countries, there is in fact not much general difference in China’s relationship with non-Muslim BRI partners. The BRI is primarily an economic partnership and the case studies show that Islam does not play a major role in implementing BRI projects even though Bianchi fails to acknowledge this. Contrary to the title of the book, China and the Islamic World, which misleadingly evokes the centrality of Islam in BRI projects. Bianchi only superficially explores how Islam plays a role in the relationship between China and Muslim-majority countries. Bianchi also has very little to say about how BRI projects affect Muslim communities or Muslims as such. Thus, the book might not appeal to Islamic studies and religious studies as much as it does to international relations and political science.

The book is a welcome contribution to China’s foreign diplomacy and international economic relations under Xi Jinping’s leadership. More significantly, the book successfully presents both China’s and the partnering countries’ interests in the BRI and discloses the potential disagreements regarding their respective future ambitions. It also presents the obstacles that China will encounter in the long run to accomplish its ambition of being a global power. Having a good grasp of the internal politics of China and the Muslim-majority countries in the book, Bianchi accurately analyses the potential impacts of the BRI on both China and the BRI partner countries. Bianchi’s recommendations for preventing problems which may arise during the implementation of the BRI projects make the book a useful resource for diplomats in China and BRI partner countries. The book is also interesting to a wider audience who want to understand China’s foreign diplomacy and international economic strategies.