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Security Order and State Transformation in Asia: Beyond Geopolitics and Grand Strategy

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Abstract

Discussions of security order in Asia typically revolve around questions of geopolitics, the balance of power, the purported grand strategies of major powers, and the form and contribution of formal regional institutions or the so-called "regional security architecture". This essentially realist approach operates with a notion of states as coherent, territorially bounded, strategic actors. It thereby misses important developments in regional security order associated with the transformation of states beyond this "Westphalian" model. I draw attention to two important examples: the emergence of transnational governance networks to address non-traditional security threats that easily cross state boundaries; and the fragmentation and internationalisation of Chinese state apparatuses associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Asian Security: The Statist Debate

Within International Relations (IR), the subfield of security studies has undeniably broadened in the post-Cold War era. Despite resistance from realists, the notion of "security" has been expanded well beyond its earlier near-exclusive focus on interstate military relations, to include a host of "non-traditional" threats, while the concept of "human security" shifted attention from states to communities and individuals as the referent object of security. New critical approaches from Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism have considerably enriched the intellectual life of security studies, albeit at the cost of the subfield's coherence, as realists had warned.

However, the impact of this intellectual broadening has always been somewhat limited with respect to Asian security studies, and is arguably now dwindling even further in an era of intensifying great-power competition. Discussion of Asian security has broadened somewhat, with greater attention to non-traditional security (NTS), and some scattered attention to human security, at least in the 1990s. However, it is notable that mainstream discussion remained resolutely "traditional". The vast bulk of scholarship – and certainly the vast bulk of discussions at international conferences – has remained concentrated on either interstate military dynamics or interstate cooperation through formal regional institutions, overwhelmingly those centred around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The main problems (*problematiques*) posed in this approach concern great-power rivalry and how/ whether it can be contained institutionally. This has generated very lengthy but ultimately inconclusive and very repetitive discussions about ASEAN-centred institutions and their shortcomings/ possible alternatives – the so-called "regional security architecture" – through the 1990s, and again in the 2000s. Even NTS and human security issues are overwhelmingly addressed through this prism, as almost all scholars are concerned to assess the shortcomings of regional institutions in managing these issues. This is typically blamed on Asian states' attachment to sovereignty and non-interference, which precludes the emergence of more robust regional governance. Growing Chinese power has only intensified this traditional focus and increasingly gloomy assessments of security dynamics. An optimistic wave of 1990s/ early 2000s scholarship about the emergence of a new regional "identity" that could dampen Hobbesian dynamics has given way to dark warnings about the division of ASEAN when confronted with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, China's quest to remake international order in its own image via the Belt and Road Initiative, and endless discussion of mounting Sino-US rivalry.

In short, East Asia is generally seen as a region of "Westphalian" states whose security relationships have basically not progressed very far from the balance-of-power models developed in realist IR. Even when scholars are not explicitly realist, they implicitly use realist ontologies, particularly with respect to the state: they tend to speak and write of states as unitary actors, possessing a singular worldview and security outlook, and pursuing a single, coherent foreign and security policy, guided by calculations of national interest. It is entirely normal for scholars to make pronouncements about "China's" foreign policy, or what "the Philippines" is doing, for example, and this approach – often seen as a linguistic shorthand, but in fact expressing deep ontological assumptions about states and security – is rarely challenged.

Bringing State Transformation In

Notwithstanding the insights provided by this statist approach, I argue that this misses the way in which states are transforming in an era of globalisation and the attendant impact on security practices and dynamics in Asia.

Much of my research has been concerned to challenge the realist conception of the state in IR, promoting a richer, more complex conceptualisation of the state that gets us closer to empirical reality and allows us to understand and explain security dynamics that are sometimes not even visible through realist lenses. In broad terms, that has involved using Gramscian state theory, as developed by Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop (Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 1978; Jessop 1990; Jessop 2008). This approach sees states not as "things" –

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and therefore certainly not as unitary "actors" – but rather as condensations of social relationships. Because state apparatuses distribute power and resources, they are fought over between socio-political groups – most notably social classes and class fractions but also state-based forces (e.g. bureaucratic and military groupings), and ethnic, religious and gendered groups – as part of their wider struggle for power and resources. Which institutions emerge, and how they operate in practice, is ultimately traceable to these conflicts.

This approach differs from others in IR that attend to domestic politics, such as Liberalism, Neoclassical Realism, or Foreign Policy Analysis, in two ways. First, it always situates socio-political conflict within the wider context of continually evolving capitalist dynamics. The nature, composition and strength of the forces in conflict is intimately related to the development of productive forces in particular societies, which is ultimately tied to the development of global capitalism as a whole. Therefore, political dynamics in and around the state can only be fully understood in relation to economic development, i.e. this approach is grounded in political economy analysis.[1]

The second difference is that this approach does not assume that domestic struggles are ultimately resolved into a singular policy "decision" which then directs the state's behaviour as a whole. Instead, it is open to the possibility that different state apparatuses, reflecting their links to, or even capture by, different socio-political forces, may pursue quite distinct, or even contradictory, objectives at any point in time. Joel Migdal (2001, 20, 22) captures this in his later work on the state:

> The sheer unwieldy character of states' far-flung parts, the many fronts on which they fight battles with groupings with conflicting standards of behavior, and the lure for their officials of alternative sets of rules that might, for example, empower or enrich them personally or privilege the group to which they are most loyal, all have led to diverse practices by states' parts or fragments… [These] have allied with one another, as well as with groups outside, to further their goals… [producing outcomes] often quite distinct from those set out in the state's own official laws and regulations. These alliances, coalitions or networks have neutralized the sharp territorial and social boundary that [Weberian state theory] has acted to establish, as well as the sharp demarcation between the state as preeminent rule maker and society as the recipient of those rules… the state is a contradictory entity that acts against itself.

It is theoretically *possible* that political leaders may strive to impose a single strategic vision, reining in any wayward parts of the state, but the success of such efforts cannot be *taken for granted* as an analytical starting point. Imposing unity on the state apparatus always involves political struggle, and success is far from guaranteed. Therefore, we need to remain open to the possibility of different state-society compacts behaving in different ways in the international realm, and actively study state managers' efforts to "impose a measure of coherence" on their conduct (Jessop 2008, 36–37), rather than simply assuming that states are either unitary actors, or ultimately behave as such once domestic politics have "finished" with the production of a state's foreign policy.

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[1] The closest equivalent is Etel Solingen's work, which understands politics to be animated by struggles between coalitions supporting or opposing globalisation/ liberalisation. This moves us in the right direction, but this rather simplistic, binary distinction does not characterise political struggles in all territories or on all issues, and tends to collapse when applied to empirical cases, as ruling coalitions are said to be "hybrids" of the two ideal types.

In work with Shahar Hameiri I have further complicated the picture by drawing attention to the dynamics of *state transformation*. Building on extensive scholarship in state theory, political geography, public policy, global governance and other subfields, we have argued that IR analysts should pay attention to the way that state apparatuses are being transformed by socio-political struggles attending the period of capitalist development often labelled "globalisation". Despite its frequent depiction in IR as a natural or transhistorical unit (Agnew 1994), the Weberian/ Westphalian state is actually a recent historical achievement. It consolidated in Europe during the industrial revolution following centuries of princely struggles to unify disparate territories into national formations (Spruyt 1994; Teschke 2003), and in the global South only after decolonization. The Bretton Woods settlement then bolstered this form of statehood by supporting Keynesian compacts between capital and labour. These developments helped to solidify "the primacy of national economies, national welfare states, and national societies managed by national states concerned to unify national territories and reduce uneven development" (Jessop 2009, 99). However, the Weberian-Westphalian state form has been substantially transformed since the 1970s capitalist crises. Led initially by new-right forces in the US and Britain, trade unions were defeated, wage growth was curbed, state assets were privatized, and international trade and finance were deregulated (Harvey 2005). Corporatist and developmentalist apparatuses were dismantled and replaced by new institutions focused on promoting global competitiveness (Cerny 1997). Further state transformation followed as ruling groups adapted governance structures to the resultant rise of globalisation, fundamentally reworking the Weberian-Westphalian state in most jurisdictions worldwide.

In our most recent work on China, we have emphasised that even this most superficially "Westphalian" of Asian states has undergone such transformation, summarising the key dynamics under three headings: fragmentation, decentralisation, and internationalisation (Jones 2018).

1. The *fragmentation* of state authority stems from decades of piecemeal state reform and a general move towards regulatory governance. The privatization of SOEs and the abolition of developmentalist ministries and agencies dismantled Fordist-Keynesian institutions, with policymaking authority reassigned to quasi-autonomous or independent regulators (Majone 1994). Scholars have observed a general shift from the top-down, command and control structure characterizing Weberian-Westphalian states towards a regulatory state model. In the former, decision-making and authority is highly centralized in executive institutions that intervene directly to secure desired goals. In regulatory states, central agencies retreat to using negative coordination, issuing broad guidelines to steer diverse public, private, and hybrid actors towards preferred outcomes (Majone 1994; Jayasuriya 2001). This model has spread beyond the West through structural adjustment programs, adaptation to economic crises and the new international division of labour, and donor interventions designed to replace developmental states with market-supporting "governance states" (Harrison 2004; Minogue and Cariño 2006; Minogue and Cariño 2006; Dubash and Morgan 2013).

2. *Decentralisation* has also become ubiquitous, with the devolution of policymaking and control over resources and the rise of global cities and city-regions (Brenner 2004; Keating 2013). Decentralization has spread to developing countries through post-conflict state building interventions and development projects (World Bank 2007).

3. Finally, many formerly purely domestic institutions and agencies have become *internationalised*. To support and govern increasing economic transnationalization, regulatory and judicial bodies have formed "transgovernmental networks" to harmonize policies and standards (Slaughter 2004; Brand 2007; Demirović 2011). Similarly, functional ministries and agencies have networked with their foreign counterparts to manage economic and security issues (Bickerton 2012; Hameiri and Jones 2015a). Rosenau (2003) dubs this "fragmegration": state fragmentation enabling new forms of transnational integration. Furthermore, many subnational governments now engage in quasi-autonomous "paradiplomacy" (Kuznetsov 2015).

These developments make it even less likely that states can be properly understood using a "unitary actor" model, and even more necessary for us to study how (and how successfully) state managers try to achieve coherence at a time when many more state-society blocs are active in the international domain than mainstream IR typically imagines.

Implications for Asian Security (1): The Emergence of Transnational Governance

The first major implication of this understanding of statehood for the study of Asian security dynamics is that security governance is now emerging beyond the intergovernmental institutions that are the focus of mainstream, statist scholarship.

Mainstream approaches identify security problems, survey the main regional institutions supposed to address them (mostly ASEAN-centred, e.g. the ASEAN Regional Forum, or just ASEAN itself), find them badly wanting, and thus declare security governance to be "weak" or even absent in the Asia-Pacific (Kirchner 2007, 11–12; e.g. Caballero-Anthony 2008). Asian states' Westphalian attachment to sovereignty is said to be a major barrier to the emergence of effective supranational institutions, causing regional security order to stagnate or even regress. A typical judgement is Odgaard's (2007, 216) claim that China offers "no viable alternative to the Cold War structure of international relations based on absolute sovereignty, non-interference and traditional power balancing". This contributes to the broader sense that the international system is being dragged "back to Westphalia" by rising powers like China (Flemes 2013, 1016–1017).

In contrast, Hameiri and I have shown that transnational security governance *is* emerging in Asia – just not where, or in the form, that mainstream statists tend to expect (Hameiri and Jones 2015a; Hameiri and Jones 2016; Hameiri, Jones, and Sandor 2018). We have shown that, thanks to state transformation dynamics, functional agencies are increasingly internationalising and networking across state borders to manage shared areas of concern and create new governance systems that better "map onto" the scale of transnational problems. However, this does not take the form of state ceding sovereignty and authority to supranational institutions, which intervene directly to solve security problems. Rather, it involves efforts to transform how domestic institutions address particular issues according to internationally-agreed standards, processes and rules. This transformation is often promoted and supported by international organisations and/ or the agencies of powerful states affected by particular transnational issues, along with likeminded actors within states and societies targeted by these initiatives. However, because such governance changes would involve changing how power and resources are distributed and used, they are resisted by actors who would stand to lose out. The practical form and operation of security governance is thus determined by struggles between the coalitions contesting

state transformation, which is rooted in the specific political economy dynamics of particular issue areas (see also Hameiri and Jones 2015b).

The governance arrangements emerging from such struggles often do not map onto established modes of governance or regional organisations, such that mainstream statists may not even notice their existence. Our book, *Governing Borderless Threats*, considered how three NTS issues were governed in Southeast Asia. One of these issues, life-threatening environmental degradation originating in Indonesia, is indeed governed in part through ASEAN structures; but it operates primarily through trying to change how Indonesia is governed internally, rather than by establishing interventionist powers at the ASEAN level, as mainstream statists expect, leading them to lament that nothing is really happening. Our other issue areas – pandemic disease, specifically avian influenza, and transnational crime/ terrorism, specifically efforts to combat money laundering – were not governed through ASEAN at all. The bird flu case involved interventions led by the World Health Organisation and Food and Agriculture Organisation designed to transform domestic and animal and human health systems. And money laundering was addressed through the transformation of domestic governance according to the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) 40 Recommendations, as supervised by a FATF-sponsored regional grouping, the Asia Pacific Group, which includes over 50 different territories plus the United States, cutting right across several traditional international organisations. The efficacy of these approaches did not depend on whether states surrendered sovereignty to supranational enforcement agencies (which in most cases were never envisaged or established), but rather on struggles between the forces promoting and opposing governance transformation, which also cut across the domestic/ international divide.

Contrary to the "Westphalian" images of China repeated *ad infinitum* in mainstream statist scholarship, we have also found that Chinese agencies are increasingly involved in such transnational governance networks, as a result of previous rounds of state fragmentation, decentralisation and internationalisation. For example, Chinese agencies – specifically, the health departments of two subnational governments, Yunnan province and Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region – have participated in the Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance (MBDS) network since 2001. MBDS is headquartered in the Thai health ministry and backed by international philanthropic groups, like Google and Rockefeller, the US Center for Disease Control, and the WHO. By building capacity, sharing intelligence and cooperating in pandemic preparedness and response, the MBDS implements the WHO's 2005 International Health Regulations and its Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases, which are all focused on the transformation of domestic governance to contain the emergence and spread of pandemics (see MBDS Secretariat 2019). From 2006, multinational teams of health, customs, immigration and border officials have been created, focused on 37 sites. During "public health emergencies of international concern", an emergency operating centre is established and teams deploy to help contain pandemics. Examples include outbreaks of dengue fever (on the Thai-Laotian border), typhoid (Vietnam-Laos), avian flu (Laos, Thai-Laos), and swine flu, and sent teams to Myanmar after cyclone Nargis (Long 2011). The latest MBDS alert, at the time of writing, relates to a large-scale outbreak of African swine fever in China. This is a far cry from the 2003 SARS epidemic, when Chinese officials initially tried to cover up the disease.

Chinese agencies are also involved in maritime security governance initiatives. Studying this cooperative approach from some maritime agencies rounds out a picture usually dominated by naval or coastguard aggression in the South China Sea. Reflecting the frag-

mentation of authority across different agencies and their subsequent internationalisation, even after four maritime agencies were amalgamated into the China Coastguard in 2013, a separate coastguard agency, the Ministry of Transport's Maritime Safety Administration (MSA), persists independently, and participates in many international networks and initiatives. These include: the US-led West Pacific Naval Symposium, the Container Security Initiative, the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Regional Maritime Security Initiative, the International Maritime Organisation's International Ship and Port Facility Security Code programme (IMO-ISPFS), and the Japanese-led Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (Li 2010; Ho 2009b). Several of these schemes focus on developing shared norms, rules, regulations and practices that are then implemented domestically, i.e. they operate through the promotion of state transformation (see Hameiri and Jones 2016, 804–806). For example, the US's International Port Security Program (IPSP) involves participating states – including China – changing their domestic governance according to the IMO-PSPFS code then submitting to inspections by the US Coastguard and US-authorised private sector inspectors to ensure compliance. The harmonisation of port governance is intended to combat the use of shipping for smuggling, trafficking in illegal goods, nuclear proliferation, and terrorist activities. The MSA has also been involved in the IMO-led Cooperative Mechanism in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, which has successfully built the coastguard capacity of littoral states to combat piracy there (Ho 2009a; Khalid 2009).

Continuing the piratical theme, Chinese security actors have also internationalised to deal with riverine banditry on the Mekong River, which threatens Chinese shipping. Here activity has been led by China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS), a domestic policing agency. The MPS led an international manhunt after 13 Chinese sailors were killed on the Mekong in 2011, and initiated a governance network with its counterparts in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, headquartered at Yunnan's Guanlei port, generating bimonthly multinational patrols along the river. Yunnan water police vessels are involved in every patrol, while other states contribute ships on rotation (Interviewees E09 2018; Interviewee E15 2018). A Chinese police official describes the patrolling vessels as operating like "one police force together" (Interviewee E15 2018). Chinese researchers who have been on the patrols explain that they effectively extend the Chinese police's jurisdiction beyond China's borders, enabling them to arrest suspected criminals, who are then handed over to the local authorities (Interviewees E09 2018). The patrols have also established hotlines along the river to allow mariners and local people to contact the police (Interviewee E15 2018). They have often involved substantial arrests and interception of drugs and other contraband. For example, in 2013 a Sino-Laotian patrol in 2013 seized 580kg of ATS tablets worth US$15m (Marshall 2016). In 2016, the patrols reportedly yielded 9,926 arrests and 6,467 drug-related criminal cases, plus the seizure of 12.7 tonnes of drugs, 55.2 tonnes of precursor chemicals and a large amount of firearms and ammunition (Pan and Shi 2017). These patrols have recently been consolidated into a new Lancang-Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Centre (LM-LESC), based in Kunming. LM-LESC is a formal international organisation, headed by a Chinese secretary-general, with each participating country contributing a deputy secretary-general (LM-LESC 2019a). Its work covers five areas: joint patrols; joint operations; intelligence and investigation support; law enforcement capacity building; and information sharing (LM-LESC 2019b). A senior LM-LESC official claims the latter part of its work is "just like Interpol", using the same i247 systems to share intelligence and arrest warrants (Interviewee E15 2018).

Even Chinese corporate actors have become involved in governing NTS issues. Most notably, they have been the primary agencies through which China's opium substitution programme (OSP) has been implemented in Myanmar and northern Laos. Chinese agribusinesses are given subsidies and import duty breaks to encourage them to establish plantations in opium-growing countries, to provide alternative livelihoods for farmers and wean them off opium production. Although this is a national policy, it actually originated in county-level transboundary initiatives in Yunnan in the early 1990s; it was then scaled up to a provincial policy in the late 1990s before local leaders successfully lobbied Beijing to adopt opium substitution as part of the "people's war on drugs" from 2004. However, rather than being run by the MPS, China's OSP is overseen by the Ministry of Commerce, with policy implementation and financing actually devolved to the Yunnan bureau of commerce, reflecting the extensive decentralisation of power in China, even with respect to foreign relations (Su 2015). This has allowed corrupt local officials to funnel assistance towards agribusinesses linked closed to the local party-state, which have abused the OSP to establish plantations through land-grabbing and forced displacement, in cahoots with corrupt local officials in Laos and Myanmar, often in areas that cannot even maintain opium crops (Shi 2008). Coupled with a collapse in the price of rubber, the main substitution crop, this has contributed to extensive deprivation and anti-Chinese resentment, particularly in Myanmar, while doing practically nothing to address opium production, which increased during the most intensive phase of the OSP (Woods and Kramer 2012; Kramer et al. 2014; Shi 2015). Coupled with the behaviour of other local government and corporate actors, this has actually undermined security in the Sino-Myanmar borderlands (Hameiri, Jones, and Zou 2019). This demonstrates the determinate consequences of the political economy context in shaping governance outcomes.

The point here, therefore, is not to claim that these security governance networks are all working well and we have nothing to worry about. The point is that they exist and are worthy of study as part of our attempt to understand, evaluate and improve Asian security order. Importantly, these same initiatives are being launched at the same time that other Chinese agencies are behaving in a rather bellicose manner, sometimes, notably with respect to maritime security, in nearly identical policy spaces. But realist ontologies lead analysts to focus exclusively on the bellicosity, assuming that this represents "China", and overlook parallel behaviour that speaks to the contrary. Alternatively, they might note it, but suggest that "China" is clearly not serious about cooperation because "it" is doing non-cooperative things at the same time, a conclusion that only makes sense if one believes that every action taken by every element of the party-state is tightly controlled and regulated by a top leadership with infinite oversight and control – which is absolutely not the case (see Jones 2018).

The truth is that, as a result of state transformation, states in the region, including China, are less coherent than mainstream IR theories suggest, and a range of novel security actors and practices are at work. It is not simply the case that Asian (in)security is dictated by "Westphalian" states, or that China's rise is dragging the region back to the age of balance-of-power politics. Complex cooperative initiatives are going on at the exact same time. We cannot describe, still less evaluate, the Asian security order without taking these initiatives into account. That begins with a shift of optics, away from a realist ontology of the state, which allows us to see a more diverse array of actors and interventions. We may still conclude that these initiatives are inadequate or unsuccessful, or being overshadowed, undermined or even ruined by more aggressive actors and actions elsewhere, but such a conclusion would have to be reasoned from investigation and evidence, rather than

merely being assumed. Currently, many analysts are simply blind to a big part of the security picture in the region. Moreover, the existence of more cooperative actors and initiatives clearly creates an entry point for policy actors seeking a more resilient security order in East Asia. They can work alongside agencies trying to collaborate with their foreign counterparts, reinforcing them against their more hawkish compatriots. A doom-and-gloom picture of "billiard-ball" states on a collision course, on the other hand, is a counsel of despair that downgrades human agency and narrows policy options to questions of deterrence and response, which may bring about the very collision they are ostensibly seeking to avoid.

Implications for Asian Security (2): The Belt and Road Initiative

A second example that demonstrates the power of viewing Asian security dynamics through the prism of state transformation is that it gives us a more accurate understanding of what realists generally gloss as "grand strategy". Nowhere is that task more pressing today than with respect to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

For realists and those influenced by realist ontology, the BRI is viewed through the prism of "grand strategy" and geopolitics. They depict BRI as a new, more "proactive" Chinese "grand strategy", designed to produce "a more multipolar order, in Asia and globally" (Leverett and Wu 2016). They describe it as a "well thought-out Chinese grand strategy… [designed] to reclaim [China's] geopolitical dominance in Asia… [challenge] US dominance and… create a Chinese-centered order" (Bhattacharya 2016, 2). Described as a "geopolitical and diplomatic offensive" (ECFR 2015, 2), or even "Chinese neo-imperialism" (Miller 2017, 18), BRI is said to aim at "nothing less than rewriting the current geopolitical landscape" (Fasslabend 2015), or even "world dominance" (Fallon 2015, 140), through which Xi Jinping seeks "to re-constitute the regional order – and eventually global order – with new governance ideas, norms, and rules" (Callahan 2016, 1). Nor is this limited to Western analysts. Some Chinese scholars, commentators and even and officials also frame BRI as a "grand strategy" (H. Chen 2016), a "great initiative" planned personally by Xi, reflecting his strategic thought (Xu and Wang 2016), aiming to restore China's "rightful" great-power status (Du and Ma 2015; Wang 2017).

However, using a state transformation lens, the picture looks very different (Jones and Zeng 2019). Far from being a top-down grand strategy it is possible to trace BRI's emergence through a long-term process of bottom-up activity and lobbying, aggregated into rather vague national guidelines. As my research with Jinghan Zeng has shown, the BRI began as a vague slogan ("one belt, one road") in late 2013, and was only subsequently fleshed out by politico-economic actors lobbying for power and resources (Jones and Zeng 2019). They successfully populated the emerging policy platform with their longstanding projects, some of which date back to the late 1980s, and all of which are primarily intended to stimulate local economic growth rather than corresponding to any geopolitical plan (Summers 2016; Christoffersen 2016; Jones and Zeng 2019). This ferocious lobbying and interpretation of Xi's vague slogan – not Xi's strategic vision – caused the BRI to expand from a programme aimed primarily at neighbouring Asian states to one that was global in scope and open to all countries to participate (X. Zeng 2016). It generated policy guidelines that are little more than a grab-bag or wish list, including virtually every part of the party-state and failing entirely to prioritise among them (see NDRC et al. 2015). The initiative is so incoherent and lacking in top-down direction that not only is there no official map of the BRI, but Beijing has even banned unofficial ones (Narins and Agnew 2019).

The Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) cannot even settle on a consistent definition of BRI countries, with its annual reports on outbound investment referring to both 59 and 61 "countries along the Belt and Road" in 2017, but 56 and 63 in 2018, for example (MOFCOM 2018; MOFCOM 2019),[2] despite the Office of the Leading Group for the BRI (2019), under the State Council, listing 138 BRI countries.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the implementation of the BRI does not correspond to any clear pattern, as we would expect if "grand strategy" were really directing the initiative. Despite recurrent claims that BRI is about promoting "new norms" that challenge the liberal international order, one struggles in vain to identify *any* particular norms being developed or disseminated through the initiative. Official policy documents express values around economic integration and pluralism/ multiculturalism, but this pro-market, "live and let live" approach hardly constitutes an alternative China model, let alone a strident challenge to liberal order (Jones 2019a). Scholarly and official discussion in China itself centres more around what norms China *could* promote and what a specifically Chinese notion of global governance *could* involve (e.g. J. Zeng 2019). The truth is that they do not yet know; they are trying to fill the void following Xi's vague pronouncements on the subject. Yet, in truth, the debate contains little of substance: "not much new", as one analyst concludes (Swaine 2016).

Nor is the economic activity at the real heart of the BRI showing much sign of strategic direction. Analysis showed that outbound Chinese investment is not even being guided by the six broad "corridors" outlined in Beijing's main policy blueprint; it remains heavily concentrated in East Asia and in developed economies, and non-BRI investment has grown faster than BRI investment (Dollar 2017; M. X. Chen and Lin 2018, 11–12). MOFCOM (2019) states that only 13 percent of outbound investment is going to BRI countries. Ye's (2019, 12) analysis of project documents released from 2014-16 also shows that BRI activities were "not regulated or guided" by official policy frameworks. Indeed, China's central bank governor has openly complained about investments proceeding that "do not meet our industrial policy requirements for outward investment", noting that "they are not of great benefit to China and have led to complaints abroad" (Feng 2017).

If BRI projects and investments are not being driven by grand strategy, what *is* driving them? Ye's (2019, 12) analysis is again revealing: project documents show that "industrial overcapacities" were "the main motivation behind projects and programs". This reflects the BRI's true nature: it is a strategic-seeming overlay on some critical imperatives emanating from structural contradictions in China's political economy, particularly massive surplus capacity, faltering growth and profitability, and excessive debt. The BRI is a "spatial fix" for these problems, seeking to externalise them and initiate a fresh round of capital accumulation (Jones 2019b; see also Summers 2018). It acts as a second round of post-global financial crisis stimulus for Chinese state-owned enterprises in particular, especially those in the saturated infrastructure sectors, following the exhaustion of the first round amid burgeoning overcapacity and the *de facto* bankruptcy of many local governments. Unsurprisingly, therefore, analysis shows that construction contracts vastly outweigh productive investment – US$256bn versus US$148bn from 2014-18 – and SOEs account for 96 percent of construction projects and 72 percent of direct investment (Joy-Perez and Scissors 2018). BRI financing has even been appropriated for domestic use to "save loss-making SOEs" (Ye 2019, 13–14).

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[2] The first figure refers to non-financial direct investment while the latter refers to contracted projects.

Accordingly, what is built in the name of the "Belt and Road" is heavily determined not by some kind of grand strategy or geopolitical plan, but rather by the interests of Chinese (especially state-linked) corporate interests, and how these intersect with interests on the recipient side. Chinese scholars and officials like to emphasise that the BRI is an initiative, not a strategy, because an initiative is an invitation to cooperate whereas a strategy is imposed. This is not mere sophistry. Even if there really was a blueprint and map of what "China" wanted to build (which there clearly is not), it could not be built without the consent of governments along the "belt and road". Moreover, China's development financing really *is* recipient-driven: would-be beneficiaries must identify the projects they want, then apply to Beijing for assistance. This model is explicitly reflected in the BRI, which involves would-be participants identifying their development needs and priorities (effectively, a wish-list), then bilateral discussions to see where Chinese interests and resources can contribute, leading to a framework document that sets the main priorities for cooperation. This framework may be signed by senior leaders, giving the impression of traditional interstate diplomacy; but its content and subsequent implementation is directed very much "bottom up" by actors on the recipient side, and Chinese firms prospecting for overseas business opportunities. The latter often lobby would-be recipients to apply for Beijing's support for projects that these firms can implement, in the hope of winning the tied contract (Hameiri 2015). Recipient governments may agree because the project is genuinely needed for economic development, but also as a means of dispensing patronage, accessing kickbacks, or in combination with side-payments like military assistance (Jones 2019b).

This dynamic can result in a plethora of deals that, far from adding up to a strategic vision, are simply "incoherent": a "belt and road to nowhere", as one analyst observes (Smith 2018). Driven by need or greed, recipients can often pursue projects that are not really economically viable. Weak and fragmented governance of outbound investment on the Chinese side permits irrational exuberance – particularly when the debt burden rests with the recipient, creating serious moral hazard – while providing little meaningful assessment of economic or political risk in host countries and virtually no on-the-ground assessment of SOEs' conduct (Hameiri and Jones 2018; Jones and Zou 2017). This explains the extravagance and irrationality of many high-profile BRI programmes and why several have gone seriously awry, notably in cases like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Kenya, Myanmar and the Maldives, where heavily indebted governments have been forced to try to renegotiate projects or restructure their debts.

The realist claim that this results from Chinese "debt trap diplomacy" is a classic instance of realist lenses occluding more than they reveal (Chellaney 2017; Chellaney 2018). This thesis assumes that "China" is a rational, unitary actor, engaged in long-range strategic planning, which drives all parts of the party-state. The Chinese leadership has deliberately decided to offer unsustainable loans to poor countries, knowing full well that the recipient will eventually plunge into debt crisis, creating leverage for China and possibly the opportunity to seize key infrastructure like ports, thereby extending China's naval reach. Such claims collapse under empirical scrutiny and only appeal to those who, adopting a realist outlook, see no need to look closely at the reality on the ground.

Consider the most prominent example cited in support of this realist interpretation of the BRI: Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. Far from symbolising cunning "debt trap diplomacy", this was a prime case of shoddy investment practices going wrong, requiring a bailout from state financiers (the following draws on Grey 2018). The idea of building a port at Hambantota had been circulating in Sri Lankan policy circles for over three decades, and

was flagged in the 2002 "Regaining Sri Lanka" development strategy, but not implemented due to feasibility concerns. After Hambantota native Mahinda Rajapaksa became president in 2005, he fast-tracked the project, requesting assistance from China. Chinese SOEs China Harbour Engineering Company and Sinohydro agreed to undertake the project, with loans to Colombo from China's EXIM Bank covering 85 percent of the US$360m cost, at 6.3 percent interest – a high rate, reflecting the profit-seeking orientation of even China's policy banks.[3] Construction began in 2008, and the first phase was completed in 2010. A second phase, costing US$750m, aimed to make the port the largest in South Asia by 2014, and was again commissioned well before the BRI had even launched. As a senior researcher in a think tank linked to China's State Council, familiar with the project, notes that Chinese involvement was commercial: "the Chinese firms and banks expected a good outcome… the port would make a profit and [the Sri Lankan government] could repay the debt" (Interviewee E06 2018). To sum up, the project was driven by Sri Lanka, not China, and it was established on a commercial basis, by profit-seeking actors.

In practice, however, the port created vast surplus capacity: in 2016, it made just $1.8m in profit and, accordingly, Sri Lanka could not service its debt. In July 2017, in exchange for US$1.1bn to service its debts to EXIM Bank, Colombo transferred a 70 percent stake in the port to a different SOE, China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH), under a 99-year lease, along with 1,235 acres of land. Far from realising China's cunning plans, this deal was quite negative from a Chinese perspective. The responsibility for making Hambantota repay its construction costs has shifted from the recipient government to a Chinese SOE. As the State Council researcher states, "the debt crisis for other countries is an asset crisis for Chinese banks". CMPH – ultimately backed by state-owned banks – has acquired a "white elephant project" that may never provide a return on its US$1.1bn construction cost. "That for China is a failure, not successful… This behaviour is a trap for Chinese firms" (Interviewee E06 2018). Furthermore, the oft-heard claim that China plotted to seize Hambantota to use as a naval base is clearly fanciful: the lease agreement specifically prohibited this, and in July 2018 the Sri Lankan navy's southern command was instead relocated to the port. Far from a case of skilful "debt trap diplomacy", this is a case study of Chinese ineptitude, with an attempt to export surplus capacity and capital creating a "debt trap" for the Chinese state.

Nor is this case unique. Lu et al. (2016, 198–199) note that, as of 2014, China's overseas assets, totalling US$6.4tr, were yielding a net loss. As Joy-Perez and Scissors (2018, 5) point out, China is itself in a "debt trap" in countries like Venezuela, where it has lost US$20bn of US$62.2bn lent. It will always be possible to apply a realist gloss to developments like this, by claiming that "China" would not endure such colossal losses without some long-term game plan; the theoretical assumptions of coherent, unitary, strategic state behaviour mean that, somewhere, there *must* be a strategic rationale. Through so-called realist lenses, the reality of fragmented, poorly coordinated and error-prone behaviour by Chinese party-state actors is magically transformed into coherent, strategic behaviour. This involves making assumptions about the way the Chinese party-state operates that are belied by decades of scholarship by Chinese politics specialists.

A state transformation perspective therefore offers a reality check for realism when evaluating Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy. Far from being a "well-thought-out grand strat-

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[3] Chinese BRI loans typically charge around 5-6 percent interest. Concessional loans from Northern multilateral development banks are closer to 0.5 percent.

egy", the BRI is revealed as a strategic-sounding, but actually exceedingly vague and capacious, overlay for a series of primarily economic interests. As an initiative personally associated with Xi, it certainly mobilises actors across the party-state, but these actors are not simply following a top-down plan; they are debating, shaping and populating the party-state's loose policy platform, using the initiative to pursue their own interests under the BRI's banner. This results not in coherent, strategic behaviour but rather in poorly coordinated, even incoherent conduct.

This again implies a very different response from other actors than the one proposed by realists. If the BRI is primarily shaped "bottom-up", with prospective recipients playing a substantial role in the selection of projects, that creates an entry point for policy actors concerned about debt sustainability or the social and environmental consequences of megaprojects. Development agencies can intervene to help recipients better manage Chinese assistance, and work with Chinese regulators to strengthen their oversight functions. NGOs and international organisations can help recipients build appropriate governance structures to regulate Chinese firms and mitigate negative consequences.

Conclusion

This paper has critiqued the tendency in Asian security studies to cleave to traditional conceptualisations of the state and security. The pluralising tendencies of the security studies subfield seem largely to have passed Asia by, resulting in continued use of realist frameworks, or at least the domination of certain realist ontologies, particularly those relating to the nature of the state. This leads to a narrow fixation on questions of the balance of power, strategy (grand or otherwise) and formal intergovernmental organisations. By showcasing research based on non-realist ontologies of the state, I have tried to show how this blinds scholars to certain developments in Asian security, leading to distorted understandings. My point is not that things like the military balance or great-power rivalry do not exist or do not matter, nor that states can never act strategically. My point is rather that these dynamics are only one possible part of the security landscape in Asia. A realist lens may bring into focus "assertive" or "aggressive" conduct, but blur out of sight more cooperative behaviour by different parts of the same state. What looks like "grand strategy" through realist lenses may look very different through the prism of state transformation.

The importance of "getting Asia right", or at least not getting it wrong, is more important now than ever (Kang 2003). The realist ontology of the state, and realist assumptions more broadly, are not innocent or harmless. A particular understanding of the state and security entails a particular understanding of what is happening today in Asia, and entails particular policy responses. For scholars of Asian security who uncritically adopt realist or crypto-realist understandings, there is a real danger of fuelling the very conflictual dynamics that their frameworks are supposed only to analyse.

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