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### The BRI, nationalism, and the securitization of Xinjiang

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#### Introduction

The key to understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>1</sup> – the ‘New Silk Road’ – is that it is amorphous, comprising numerous tangible and intangible projects. These range from building coal mines and road and rail networks, to developing digital technologies, to promoting a “community of common destiny for mankind” (人类命运共同体), to UNESCO world heritage nominations of natural parks or ethnic music. The BRI links these through evocation of a trans-historical myth of the ‘silk roads’. Succinctly, it “gives disparate Chinese projects overseas the veneer of being part of a grand strategic plan.... It is not a centralised initiative, so much as a brand... Everything and nothing is Belt and Road” (Robertson cited in Kuo and Kommenda 2018). This ‘everything and nothing’ is key to how the CCP mobilises and legitimises the project in different contexts: ‘failed’ projects can be ignored through emphasis on ‘successful’ ones.

In this chapter, we begin with a review of key criticisms of the BRI’s infrastructural and investment projects. We next consider the BRI as a vehicle for ‘soft power’: an attempt by the CCP to represent China as a rising, but inherently benign, world power. We argue that one of the main audiences for this narrative is actually the Chinese domestic population, making the BRI a nationalist project more than an internationalist one. We then turn to examine the role of the BRI in the securitisation of Xinjiang (XUAR), where it has been integral to the CCP’s systematic repression in the region.

#### The success of the new silk road?

President Xi Jinping announced what would become the BRI as the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ in September 2013 in Kazakhstan (Curtis and Klaus 2024). The initiative’s official name is the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy’ (丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路发展战略), which was abbreviated to the ‘One Belt One Road’ (一带一路) or ‘OBOR Strategy’, and changed in English translations to the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ OBR in 2016. The project has been described by Xi Jinping as the “project of the century” and “a road for peace, prosperity, opening up, and innovation, connecting

different civilizations” (in Malik et al. 2021). Rose-tinted rhetoric aside, it has been described as a “Chinese Marshall Plan” (Kuo and Kommenda 2018), which will impact “75% of the world’s population and account for more than half of the world’s GDP” (Caridi 2023: 192).

But in the decade since its inception, the ambiguous scale and a lack of transparency has made it difficult to evaluate, even focusing on more tangible projects such as infrastructure. Early examples, such as the participation of Italy and the development of Trieste port, which were much celebrated by China, have now been rolled back. Italy announced it would not renew its MOU at the end of 2023 (Nadalutti and Rüländ 2024). While broader shifts within the EU towards ‘de-risking’ dependencies on China and security concerns were a factor, so too was the fact many of the benefits originally promised – such as increasing Italian exports to China and Chinese investment in the country more broadly – had failed to materialise (Nadalutti and Rüländ 2024). Other significant BRI strands, such as the Polar Silk Road (PSR), have stalled with the cancelling or suspending of most of its projects (Lanteigne 2022).

The reasons in the PSR case are complicated yet revealing. Besides Russia’s invasion of Ukraine stalling the Russian strands, others have been suspended for a variety of reasons. In Greenland, the Chinese company General Nice was stripped of its licence to the Isua iron mine after “inactivity” and because it failed to make the agreed guaranteed payments, while its attempts to purchase a naval station were blocked due to security concerns (Jonassen 2021). Meanwhile, the development of the rare-earth and uranium Kuannersuit mine was halted due to environmental impact (Gronholt-Pedersen 2021). Similarly, the ‘Arctic Connect’ project to lay a submarine communication cable along the Northern Sea Route – billed as part of the Digital Silk Road and the PSR – has stalled around security issues, since it would dramatically increase Chinese intelligence-gathering capabilities, with companies obliged by PRC law to collaborate with intelligence services (Jüris 2020). The Norwegian-Finnish Arctic railway from Kirkenes to Rovaniemi, meant to ship cargo via the Arctic from Asia to markets in Europe, was cancelled. It was rejected due to concerns over environmental damage, and because it was vetoed by the indigenous Saami communities in both countries whose lands it would traverse, but also because a Finnish-Norwegian working group concluded that current cargo volumes do not justify the costs (Nilsen 2020).

Although cumulatively leading to a series of dead-ends, the diversity of reasons for the cancelled projects is telling. A critical take might not in fact see them as ‘failures’, despite cancelled projects challenging Xi’s grandiose claims to be radically transforming the global community through infrastructural investment. Many of the reasons for the cancelled PSR projects are *successful* cases of checks and balances and the agency of local communities and national governments making decisions in the face of this larger project. There are of course other BRI projects which have gone ahead and been relatively successful. However, many of these have also attracted debate over issues of violations of labour laws, environmental damage, or questions of the long-term benefit to local communities (Malik et al. 2021; Shi and Seim 2021).

The PSR examples reveal recurring questions around the environmental impact of the BRI. Five years after its initiation, amid increasing criticism by environmental agencies of the project's massive contribution to global warming, there was a turn to 'greening' the BRI. The Belt-and-Road International Green Development Coalition, co-initiated with the UN Environment Programme, was meant to align the BRI with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Nakano 2019; Zoï 2019). Official CCP sources increasingly frame the BRI as an inherently 'green' project, through which China "share[s] the ecological civilization philosophy" with the world (Belt and Road Portal 2017). However, ongoing pollution scandals, and failure to enforce green guidelines or fulfil key promises, point to 'greenwashing'. Despite hype around hydro/solar power projects, even several years after the announcement of the Green Silk Road more than 90 percent of energy sector investments were in fossil fuels (Nakano 2019). A revealing criticism of the inherent 'green-ness' of the PSR was that "an increasingly ice-free Arctic" was the basis of "the economic profitability of the region due to untapped oil and gas resources [as well as] its shorter international transit routes," so it relied on continued global warming as a *desirable* process (Sharma 2021; Lanteigne 2022).

Accusations of corruption have also been a serious issue (Hillman 2019; Malik et al. 2021). The BRI was first announced in Kazakhstan, but a decade later, the vast but stalled monorail system in Astana became a local symbol of the problems of the BRI. Building only began in 2017, which was the year it was meant to be completed. Construction was stopped in 2018 after the bank holding the loan collapsed, followed by the project being put on indefinite hold amid a corruption scandal in 2019, leading to ongoing court cases (Lillis 2023). Reviews of the planning stage have resulted in questions over inflated numbers, as well as the proposed route (Lillis 2023). Corruption is a side-effect of the lack of transparency of the BRI. But the CCP has not moved towards greater transparency to address this, because this also works in China's favour. As argued by Hillman (2019): "the BRI is opaque by design. By limiting outside scrutiny, the initiative's lack of transparency gives Chinese companies an edge in risky markets, and it allows Beijing to use large projects to exercise political influence." This includes potentially leveraging debts – including those created by corruption or embezzlement.

Drawing on a dataset of 13,427 projects worth US\$843 billion across 165 countries, Malik et al.'s (2021) significant report on the BRI found more than one-third (35 percent) of BRI infrastructure projects faced major implementation problems, such as "corruption scandals, labour violations, environmental hazards, and public protests," and these problems were more likely to occur where the project was being overseen by Chinese organisations rather than ones from the host country or a third party. Malik et al. (2021) also found that Chinese debt burdens were being vastly underreported. Largely because most BRI lending was not to sovereign borrowers but to state subsidiaries (state companies or joint ventures), these debts have been systematically underreported to the World Bank's Debtor Reporting System. These debts amount to around US\$385 billion or more (Malik et al. 2021). As noted by Malik et al. (2021), this is not only an issue for countries carrying such debts but could have global economic effects if they cannot be met.

The lack of reliable figures is a recurring issue. Drawing on what is available in the Chinese government's official statistics around the BRI, Scissors (2019) notes disparity even between what are likely to be exaggerated numbers and the rhetoric surrounding the project:

From 2014 to 2018, total Chinese investment in all BRI countries was \$190 billion. Again, this is a deliberately high estimate. At this rate, it will take until 2040 for investment to reach the \$1-trillion goal often bandied about – if this is a new Marshall Plan, it's a slow one. ... Investment is not the main economic activity in the BRI, construction is. Chinese construction activity in the full set of BRI countries was worth twice as much, at \$388 billion for 2014–8... [These] construction figures are impressive but, at this pace, it would still take 50 years for the BRI to be the \$6-trillion program [described by some].

The lack of clarity about the initiative is more than a failure of communication. For Malik and Parks (2021), the lack of transparency around lending agreements and non-disclosure of accurate statistics constitutes one of the greatest failures of a project claiming to (re)create global order: it *compromises*, rather than creates the possibility for the international community to engage in collective action or make informed decisions in the face of either national or global challenges.

### **BRI as metanarrative: soft or sharp power?**

This is where it is useful to recall the BRI is also a metanarrative: a 'brand' linking disparate projects, while making a claim that China is reworking the global order by 'rejuvenating' a historic 'Silk Road Spirit' based on 'mutuality' (Oakes 2021; Freymann 2021). If we consider Nye's definition of 'soft power' as "the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes *by attraction and persuasion* rather than coercion or payment" (2017: 2), then the metanarrative is an attempt at 'soft power'<sup>2</sup> (though investment and the leveraging of debts is certainly 'sharper'). By linking the BRI to the romantic idea of the historic 'silk roads', the CCP attempts to make Chinese investment, and China broadly, seem appealing. But in this area too, it has not had straight-forward success. Traditional propaganda, such as promotional ads distributed online, have not been effective in mobilising it to broader populations (Freymann 2021). While politicians and company elites refer to BRI when communicating with Chinese counterparts, on the ground, they see it more prosaically as 'Chinese investment', absent grand visions, metanarratives, or symbolic cultural capital (Shi and Seim 2021).

But the BRI has been more successful promoting a surge of attention around the historic 'silk roads'. Indeed, Jing Feng, coordinator of UNESCO's Silk Roads project, stated that the success of Chinese World Heritage Silk Roads nominations constituted "an important achievement in the cultural field of the OBOR initiative" (in Nakano 2022: 11). China is reframing the 'silk roads' as "a Chinese invention," founded upon their "values of peace and cooperation," which "was a Chinese gift to the world" (Freymann 2021: 23–4).

The history of the ‘silk roads’ in recent Chinese discourses is that they were initiated around 138 B.C. when emperor Han Wudi sent Zhang Qian to the ‘western regions’ (*Xibu*, now Xinjiang), ‘opening’ a trade route for Chinese products (particularly silk), connecting China with Rome. The narrative is that this route was maintained ‘peacefully’ by subsequent dynasties, but expansion of European powers after the fifteenth century put an end to it. As widely noted, none of these points are historically accurate. Extensive organised trade and exchanges across Eurasia existed for several millennia before Han Wudi, and there is little evidence that China and Rome had direct knowledge of each other. Most trade was organised by merchant and nomadic groups, not empires, and silk was neither the most common nor important commodity traded. The history of these routes is one of imperial expansion, conflict, and slavery, and European colonialism was a direct outgrowth and did not put an end to these routes (see Mishra 2020). The Chinese narrative of the historic silk roads is not substantiated by historic evidence but enables promotion of a romanticised lost ‘golden age’ that the BRI is rebuilding.

China has been the greatest financial contributor to UNESCO since 2019. Many scholars have criticised its use of World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage to make UNESCO complicit in its political agenda (Mayer and Zhang 2021). For example, the UNESCO webpage introducing the ‘silk roads’ largely covers the history of the domestication of silk in China, and its export along the ‘silk roads’, implying “the history and civilizations of the Eurasian peoples” (UNESCO nd) resulted from this single luxury commodity. Such framing by UNESCO confers legitimacy to these narratives despite being contrary to historical evidence. The Sino-centric narrative of the silk roads is increasingly prevalent in cultural heritage and tourism ventures, partly due to the courting of Chinese tourists (Winter 2022; Brown and O’Brien 2024).

But characterising the BRI as primarily a metanarrative – particularly one linked to a Sino-centric history – reveals one of the most significant audiences for this story is the Chinese population. This is clear in Chinese domestic propaganda, where the BRI is depicted as a story of the future which ‘rejuvenates’ the past (see Freymann 2021). The initiative is depicted as a vast project personally developed by Xi Jinping that is “restoring China to the original glory and hegemony which is its due” (Omriani 2021). This links it to ethno-nationalism within China and to a much longer history of Sino-centrism (*Tianxia*), since at its most basic level, it becomes a narrative of Chinese supremacy (Cheng 2019; O’Brien and Brown 2022). Thus, the BRI is best understood as a *nationalist*, rather than internationalist, project. It is less about creating a global community, than revising China’s place within that community. This is a reason for much of the obfuscation around the project; it is necessary to present the project as a success *within* China, as evidence of China’s rising (or ‘rejuvenating’) power in global affairs than it is for projects to actually succeed in other countries.

There has been increasing concern over China using ‘debt book diplomacy’; the leveraging of ongoing investments or debts to achieve political ends (Davidson 2018). Hayes (2023) argues this is not a hypothetical potential but is already occurring, notably around the trans-national repression of Uyghurs. In July 2019, 22 states signed a letter to the president of the United Nations Human Rights

Council, calling on China to uphold its obligations as a member of that council and condemning human rights violations in the Xinjiang region. Beijing responded by mobilising 37 other signatories to a letter praising China's "remarkable achievements in the field of human rights" and its "contribution to the international human rights cause" (quoted in Hayes 2023: 192). Almost all signatory states of the 'Beijing Letter' were BRI partners. Despite China's curtailing of religious freedom in Xinjiang targeting Muslim ethnic groups, many BRI partners who are Muslim majority countries have endorsed China's policies. Furthermore, some have detained and repatriated Uyghurs from their countries, including Saudi Arabia, which has repatriated Uyghurs on Hajj pilgrimage, and the United Arab Emirates, accused of hosting a 'black site' for Beijing where Chinese authorities hold Uyghurs in extra-judicial detention and interrogate them (Hayes 2023: 189–92). As argued by Hayes (2023), while many have characterised the Uyghur crisis as localised within Xinjiang, this trans-national targeting reveals the wider 'sharp power' of the BRI.

### **The 'New Silk Road' and the securitisation of Xinjiang**

The region now called Xinjiang has a complex history. Despite being described as one of China's 'peripheral' 'borderlands', at approximately 1.6 million km<sup>2</sup>, the region is larger than Spain, Germany, France, and Britain combined, and constitutes one-sixth of China's contemporary territory. For millennia, this was an important trading zone, home to numerous peoples as well as a series of kingdoms and khanates maintaining trade and diplomatic relations with the likes of Persia, Byzantium, India, as well as Chinese states. Though regularly depicted in Chinese discourses as an "empty wilderness" before Han Wudi 'opened' the 'silk road', these routes were already highly interconnected (Brown and O'Brien 2024). Indeed, Buddhism moved into China through this region, and it was long a meeting place of different religions.<sup>3</sup> In Chinese, the term *'xibu'* (western regions) was used to refer to this region, and everywhere 'westwards' of it (Millward 2007). Although Beijing now asserts that Xinjiang has been 'inseparably' part of China since the Han dynasty, Chinese imperial presence ebbed and flowed over time. It was not formally incorporated until the Qing Dynasty, as part of the Qianlong emperor's military expansion into the region and the conquest of the Dzungars, who were political rivals. The Dzungar leadership was not only defeated, but the people were ethnically cleansed<sup>4</sup> and the region was renamed 'Xinjiang', meaning 'New Territory' (Millward 2007). After the collapse of the Qing, there were briefly two East Turkistan Republics declared within the region in the 1930s and 1940s, prior to being brought under control by the CCP in 1949 (Millward 2007). When China's economy began to develop after the reforms of the 1980s–90s, much of this was confined to China's eastern coast, and economic development in Xinjiang lagged. Despite government investment in the region since the 2000s, there was a rise in ethnic violence that challenges the official narrative that the problems in Xinjiang are solely economic in origin (O'Brien 2011).

The BRI is described as central to the 'transformation' of the region in recent years: "[this] western hinterland ... is now a booming centre of traditional and

renewable energy, technology and commerce, and its capital, Urumqi, has become the largest city in greater Central Asia” (Zoi 2019: 8). Such descriptions fail to mention that Xinjiang is also China’s most rigidly controlled region, and grand development plans have been indelibly intertwined with systemic securitisation and repression.

After a spate of ethnic violence, the CCP introduced harsh security clampdowns which increased after 2017. Academics, human rights groups, and journalists drew attention to a mass campaign of imprisonment, with more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities imprisoned without trial in ‘re-education’ camps (Human Rights Watch 2018; Roberts 2020; Byler 2022). This has been attended by allegations of forced sterilisations aimed at eugenically “optimising” “ethnic ratios” by reducing the proportion of ethnic minorities in the region, alongside systematic rapes, and forms of physical and mental torture reinforcing political indoctrination (Roberts 2020; O’Brien and Brown 2022; Hayes 2023). Beyond the camps is an extensive expansion of surveillance, involving security checkpoints, monitoring with face and voice recognition, iris scanners, DNA sampling, and phone searches (Hayes 2020; Byler 2022). Alongside this, the ‘Sinicization’ campaign has razed mosques, Muslim shrines, and graveyards, and banned or policed religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan, and even traditional Islamic personal names. Scholars have characterised this as a programme of cultural genocide, potentially leading towards genocide (Klimeš and Smith Finley 2020; O’Brien and Brown 2022; Hayes 2023).

Although the Chinese government initially denied the existence of the camps, they shifted towards portraying them as an educational programme. In 2022, then United Nations Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet stated that evidence for these crimes against humanity was credible (OHCHR 2022). Many camp inmates have been moved into high-security prisons, and onto forced-labour programmes, particularly in the cotton and solar panels industries (Murphy and Elimä 2021; Cockayne 2022).

These aspects of the recent ‘development’ of Xinjiang – its transformation into a ‘booming centre’ of commerce and the site of alleged crimes against humanity – are intertwined. The former is often used to obscure the latter. Partly, this is achieved through propaganda focusing on infrastructural development, implying this self-evidently demonstrates economic and other benefits for local communities.

An interesting case is the city of Kashgar, the site of extensive urban development and transport infrastructures, a Special Economic Zone, and the reconstruction of the old city into a tourist destination. It was a much-publicised sub-venue for the 2024 Spring Festival Gala. Instead of concealing cotton or solar panel industries that have been linked with forced labour, the Gala segment opened with computer-generated images of cotton fields, and ended with the hosts proclaiming, “The windmills, the ports, the solar energy of Xinjiang carry it across mountains and seas to resonate with the world” and calling on viewers to unite around the CCP and Xi Jinping (CGTN 2024).

Kashgar’s history as a trade-hub on the ancient silk roads long predates the region’s incorporation into Chinese territory. It is a city of cultural and religious

importance to Uyghurs. Its history is appropriated within Chinese discourses framing the BRI as a direct continuation of these ancient routes, though it bears no resemblance to them: “[for Kashgar] despite the difference in time and space, the connection between the ancient Silk Road and the modern BRI... is natural and continuous” (National Development and Reform Commission 2021). The development of Kashgar was billed as a project that would alleviate local poverty, moving Uyghur residents into modern housing and creating employment through tourism. But it has been shown that inequality in Kashgar has dramatically increased over the past decade, with forced relocation resulting in increased debt and marginalisation among the Uyghur community (Steenberg and Rippa 2019). Many of the developments for the Kashgar Special Economic Zone have stalled, and while tourism has certainly boomed much of the development has been led by Han entrepreneurs,<sup>5</sup> leaving mostly low-paid service roles to ethnic minorities (Szadziwski et al. 2021; Salimjan 2022; Brown and O’Brien 2023). Such failings are not unique to Xinjiang: many BRI projects in sub-Saharan Africa, despite promises to reduce local poverty, resulted largely in the creation of low-wage jobs, have been accused of violating labour laws, and have favoured importing Chinese labour (particularly for higher-level positions) instead of locals, leading locals to question the direct benefit from such projects (Shi and Seim 2021).

Some have characterised the BRI as operating under a colonial logic of ‘extraction’ – of resources, labour, and profit – a logic especially clear in Xinjiang (Byler 2022). The BRI is a key contributing factor to the continuing human rights violations in the region. The CCP has long faced challenges of ethnic tension in Xinjiang, but to transform it into a key node of cross-border transport connections, oil pipelines, and other industries within the BRI, the Chinese state needed to dramatically extend its control over segments of the population in order to ‘stabilise’ the region (Hayes 2020).

This inter-relationship is clear in the use of forced labour in Xinjiang’s ‘booming’ BRI industries, such as cotton and solar industries (Cockayne 2022). Many of the previously mentioned ‘re-education’ centres housed factories, and relatives were pressured to take factory jobs if they hoped for their family members’ release (Murphy and Elimä 2021: 10). Many internees – and numerous members of the broader Xinjiang ethnic minority population – have been moved onto what the CCP has called “surplus labour” (富余劳动力) or “labour transfer” (劳动力转移) programmes. A 2020 official government report documented the “placement” of 2.6-million minority citizens into jobs in factories and farms within Xinjiang, but also other regions (Murphy and Elimä 2021: 10). Described as a “poverty alleviation” (扶贫) initiative, many transferees, however, were not ‘underemployed’, but include “university graduates, film makers, dentists, nurses, medical professionals, restaurateurs, businessowners, engineers, marketing professionals, [and also] retirees” (Murphy and Elimä 2021: 12). Families have been separated, with children placed in boarding facilities or foster care. Characterising this as ‘forced labour’ is further supported by evidence that minority workers are not permitted to leave factories or farms voluntarily, their IDs are held by security or local police, as well as the work being “either unpaid, paid far less than the minimum wage, or [told] that they owe a debt to their employers for food or transport” (Murphy and Elimä 2021: 12).

In the past ten years, China has moved from producing a negligible amount of polysilicon (a core component in solar panels), to the Xinjiang region alone producing 45 percent of the world's polysilicon in 2020. Cockayne (2022) estimated that Xinjiang-made polysilicon accounted for 95 percent of photovoltaic energy supplied to the world's top 30 solar-power-producing countries. He furthermore estimated that about 18 percent of globally traded pressed tomato products were produced from farms in Xinjiang, and Xinjiang cotton was to be found in around one in every five garments. In this respect at least, the BRI has certainly had a profound global reach.

As noted by Murphy and Elimä (2021: 17), while one factor is the “competitive advantage” of forced labour, the exponential growth of industry in Xinjiang has been heavily incentivised by government grants, subsidies, and tax-waivers, if companies “absorb” this “surplus labour.” These programmes have a two-fold aim. Besides production of a physical labour force giving China a competitive advantage in increasingly important sectors, they continue the work of the ‘re-education’ centres and the ‘Sinicization’ campaigns in another guise – maintaining and extending control over the Muslim minority population, and the Xinjiang region.

Beijing denies that its policies or practices are crimes against humanity, and instead asserts that the region has been stabilised and everyone is ‘happy’ (Hayes 2023). This fits the metanarrative within the BRI, as ‘a story China tells itself about itself’. Beyond the desire to increase its international influence and economic power, the CCP needs to represent itself as altruistically ‘developing’ its border regions, and minorities as unambiguously ‘happy’, to maintain its self-image as a benevolent state. It repeats this narrative it tells its domestic population, encouraging them to see their role as part of an exceptional and virtuous endeavour, both within Xinjiang and beyond its borders through the BRI, encouraging them to feel fortunate to be Chinese and subjects of the CCP.

Celebratory rhetoric that Xinjiang is ‘booming’, returning to its lost ‘silk road’ glory, thanks to Xi’s grand vision and BRI investment, not only serves to obscure human rights violations by white-washing them. We should understand the CCP’s actions towards its ethnic minority population, justified as necessary for economic development and social stability, as signs of the means the CCP deems *acceptable* to achieve its grand visions of its ‘New Silk Road’, and its own hegemony within that initiative. And besides the outcry that this ought to provoke, this should serve as a warning particularly to those within the BRI, of what the CCP is willing to do within and beyond its borders.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a review of criticisms of China’s BRI. The cancelling of projects and ongoing issues around corruption, debt, environmental damage, and lack of transparency, not only challenge the official CCP narrative that this project aims to create a new global order founded on ‘mutuality’ and ‘openness’ but also have serious international repercussions for individual nations and the global community in the long run. The mythologising of the historic silk roads is also problematic, not only for its lack of historical accuracy but for its attempt to place China

at the centre of world history. In this, the BRI is a vehicle for the CCP's stoking of nationalism within China. And in Xinjiang, the BRI is closely connected to the allegations of crimes against humanity occurring there as part of China's 'securitisation' of its western regions. Diverse products in global supply chains are linked back to its forced-labour programmes. Ironically enough, its cotton, tomatoes, and solar panels do connect the world to Xinjiang, though that connection – or complicity – should not be celebrated.

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### Notes

- 1 The project is referred to by different names / acronyms: 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) and 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). We use BRI, but both are regularly found in the wider literature.
- 2 See Nye (2017) for a more detailed discussion of this concept, and in particular its complex reception in China.
- 3 For example, in the 800s, the Uyghur society centred in what is now Turpan (Turfan) was Buddhist, Manichean, and Nestorian Christian.
- 4 Levene (2008: 188) describes the systematic destruction of the Dzungars as "arguably the eighteenth century genocide par excellence".
- 5 Among those sent for 're-education' from Kashgar during this time were four of the wealthiest Uyghur businessowners (Hoshur 2018; O'Brien and Brown 2022). This challenges the CCP's position; this was a 'poverty alleviation' initiative, but it fits a broader pattern where local leaders, and others challenging the CCP's displacement of ethnic communities to facilitate tourist development disappeared into the camps and then prisons (Salimjan 2022).

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