

Article

**Unveiling China's 'Transnational Populism' and  
Sharp Power Politics: The Case of the Belt and Road  
Initiative**

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**Abstract**

*In a mutually reinforcing context, the rise of multipolarity and the decline of the rules-based liberal multilateral world order have transformed populism from a national phenomenon into one with global dimensions, characterized by transborder transgressiveness. Rooted in nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes independence and sovereignty, this dynamic challenges the norms and values of multilateralism, fuels a vicious cycle of sharp power politics (SPP), and opens new fronts in the competition for national interests. China's recent political and economic trajectory under President Xi Jinping provides a compelling case for examining the interplay between these factors. Drawing on the evolving theoretical framework of populism and an analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this article argues that Xi Jinping's strategic framing of SPPs within an appealing populist narrative does not qualify him as a transnational populist leader. Notably, Chinese rhetoric lacks a cohesive ideology, a clearly defined transnational citizenry with shared interests, and a corresponding mechanism for the participatory representation of global citizens.*

**Keywords:** *Populism, sharp-power politics, multipolarity, multilateralism, China, governance, development, (in)dependence, global public goods, cooperation.*

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## Introduction

The transformation of global power dynamics, particularly in the post-Cold War era, has exposed vulnerabilities in the Western-dominated liberal multilateral order, leading to a multipolar world (dis)order. This shift has also curtailed the dominance of any single superpower, intensifying competition for influence and resources. This complex landscape has witnessed two notable political phenomena: the global rise of right- and left-wing populism and the adoption of Sharp Power Politics (SPP) by rising powers like Russia and China to enhance their global influence.

The emergence of this geopolitical landscape significantly limits the global cooperation necessary for collective action to effectively secure global public goods. Increasingly characterized by a "negative-sum game," this environment poses deeply troubling implications for the future. It fosters the development of a causal chain in which populism, typically addressed at the national level, transcends borders and amplifies the influence of sharp-power politics.

While populists often portray themselves as champions of the people, challenging the established order on behalf of the masses, SPP co-opts populist rhetoric to serve the interests of authoritarian regimes, ultimately consolidating their power. A plausible transmission mechanism involves the gradual co-option of a functioning, though flawed, rule-based democracy by exclusionary, interest-driven coalitions of established elites. These elites prioritize their class interests at the expense of long-term efficiency, leading to stagnation. Over time, populist leaders exploit systemic vulnerabilities, using their rhetoric to gain power. If they maintain power long enough, they eventually transform the system into a form of authoritarianism, reinforcing this new status quo through sharp-power tactics both domestically and internationally to expand their influence and national interests.

Within this framework, the central aim of this article is to explore the extent to which the concept of "transnational populism" (TNP) can be considered an intermediate stage linking the progression from national-level populism to authoritarianism and, subsequently, to SPP beyond national borders. Following these theoretical discussions, the article also seeks to examine whether the notion of TNP can be inferred from the extensive use of populist rhetoric within China's SPP framework, specifically in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The article is organized as follows: The second section explores key theoretical issues, evaluating the existence of a robust concept of transnational populism while examining the intersections, overlaps, and tensions between national populism, transnational populism, and sharp power politics (SPP). The third section builds on these theoretical insights to assess whether China's foreign policies can be interpreted through the framework of transnational populism within its authoritarian regime. The fourth section connects China's so-called transnational populism (TNP) to SPP, highlighting their incompatibilities, particularly in the context of the BRI. The final section concludes by summarizing the key findings.

## **Linking National and Transnational Populism with Sharp Power Politics**

### *Populism and Sharp Power Politics*

Populism, Transnational Populism (TNP), and Sharp Power Politics (SPP) are political phenomena that share certain similarities but also have distinct characteristics. Each represents a form of political influence or power that challenges existing elites and democratic institutions, yet they employ different methods and tools to achieve their objectives.

At its core, populism is a political approach that emphasizes a fundamental conflict between "the people" and "the elite." Generally, when populists are in opposition, their primary audience is not a specific ethnic group but the broader population, particularly those who perceive themselves as societal "losers." By presenting themselves as "anti-establishment," blaming elites or external forces for societal problems, populists claim to be the voice of ordinary citizens against a corrupt or out-of-touch ruling class. A second key focus of populists is their emphasis on "national sovereignty," often reflected in policies of economic protectionism and hardline stances on issues like immigration. As a result, populists typically mobilize large segments of the population by appealing to feelings of disenfranchisement and nationalism. Third, while populism may appear confined to domestic politics, it is a recurring theme across various political systems worldwide, irrespective of whether the context is democratic or authoritarian.

Since authoritarian governments resort to transnational populism to align with the spirit of SPP, a distinction must be made between populist rhetoric in opposition and in power. Populist rhetoric changes significantly depending on whether populist leaders or movements are in opposition or in power. While the core themes—such as appealing to "the people" and criticizing "the elite"—remain consistent, the tone, focus, and strategy shift depending on the political position.

Populism refers to reactions expressed in language that resonates with the public and is often justified as a response to the political and economic consequences of the national and global status quo, which disproportionately disadvantage the majority. Initially, populist leaders present themselves as outsiders combating a corrupt system on behalf of the people. At the level of discourse, they adopt a progressive stance, advocating for greater public participation in the system and reforms to benefit the populace. However, once in power, they frequently shift from addressing the genuine concerns of ordinary citizens to claiming absolute representation of an imagined "people." They position themselves as saviors of the nation, fostering a cult of personality and portraying themselves as indispensable. This transition enables them to marginalize dissent, redefine national identity, decide who belongs to the nation and justify their actions in the name of a unified public. Consequently, the focus shifts from practical solutions to symbolic battles, paving the way for authoritarianism.

In general, populists are revolutionary in opposition but become conservative and authoritarian once in power. Over time, they tend to establish their own status quo. When in opposition, populists target the political establishment, portraying elites as corrupt and disconnected from ordinary citizens. They frame the entire system—political, economic, and media—as rigged, while also attacking big business, technocrats, and foreign powers. Using revolutionary rhetoric, they promise to return power to "the people" and present utopian visions of change, positioning themselves as the voice of the disillusioned.

However, once in power, populists often confront the harsh realities of governance and the consequences of their unrealistic promises. Unable to fulfill many of their pledges, they adopt a more defensive and authoritarian approach, blaming internal or external enemies, such as bureaucracies, the judiciary, the media, or global elites, for hindering progress. Scapegoating becomes a central strategy, with threats like a "deep state" or foreign interference invoked to rally support. Calls for unity and loyalty to their leadership intensify, while opposition is portrayed as disloyal to "the people."

Ultimately, populism in power tends to lead to authoritarianism, leaving the country more unstable and its citizens less satisfied. This outcome stands in stark contrast to the populists' championing of democracy while in opposition when they advocate for direct democracy through referendums or mass movements as alternatives to representative democracy, which they claim is rigged or corrupt. Once in power, they often emphasize a majoritarian view of democracy, interpreting their electoral victory as granting them the ultimate right to govern. They frequently reject pluralism, viewing opposition as an obstacle rather than a legitimate component of the democratic process.

This outcome is directly tied to their attitude toward institutions. In opposition, populists often attack existing institutions—such as the courts, media, and political system—as corrupt and broken, promising to dismantle them and build something better. However, they often do more harm once in power by capturing and controlling these institutions or dismantling them entirely. They may undermine judicial independence, weaken the press, or concentrate power within the executive. While they continue using elections or referendums to claim popular support, these processes are often manipulated to tilt the system in their favor.

In opposition, populists frequently use nationalist or isolationist rhetoric, criticizing international organizations like the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN) for undermining national sovereignty or favoring global elites over ordinary citizens. Once in office, populists may maintain this anti-globalist stance but could also adopt a more pragmatic approach, cooperating with international organizations or foreign countries to secure economic stability or geopolitical advantages.

In conclusion, populist rhetoric serves as a thin ideology for mobilizing anger and dissatisfaction. When in opposition, it is revolutionary, confrontational, and focused on attacking the establishment. In power, however, the rhetoric shifts to become more defensive, conservative, and self-justifying. Populists continue to portray themselves as champions of the people but increasingly focus on defending their authority and blaming others for their failures.

Despite the inconsistencies in their rhetoric when in opposition versus in power, a set of observations has emerged about populism:

First, the world has witnessed an unprecedented rise in populism globally, measured either by the vote share of populist politicians (i.e., anti-elite and anti-pluralist) or by the presence of populists in government. According to V-Dem data, the share of the global population living in autocratic countries has surpassed that of those living in democratizing countries since 2009, marking almost 15 consecutive years (Nord et al., 2024). While the decline in the democratic landscape has been particularly pronounced in Eastern Europe and South and Central Asia, similar trends are emerging in continental Europe. As a result, 71% of the

world's population now lives in autocracies, up from 48% a decade ago. Electoral autocracies constitute the largest share, encompassing 44% of the global population, while 29% reside in liberal and electoral democracies.<sup>2</sup>

Second, substantial evidence suggests that the rise of populism has been driven not only by singular events—such as the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, subsequent austerity measures, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic—but also by long-term trends like globalization, automation, and the rise of social media. In this context, the rapid growth of digital technologies and advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have further amplified populism's influence at local, transnational, and global levels. Furthermore, the rise of populism is closely linked to identity and cultural dynamics (Brubaker, 2017: 367).

Third, contrary to their claims, populist rhetoric advocating for the empowerment of the silent majority to effectively participate in the system against elites, ensuring better representation of their values and a fairer share of the national income, lacks empirical validation. Evidence suggests that while populists may enhance popular representation, they exhibit majoritarian tendencies, deny pluralism, and fail to deliver the promised economic well-being in the long term. On average, populist governments discredit institutions, render them dysfunctional by politicizing them with unqualified party loyalists, suppress press freedom, limit voice and exit in markets, and undermine human rights and the rule of law.

The Freedom House Index (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024) indicated that “freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023. The scope and scale of deterioration were extensive, affecting one-fifth of the world's population. Almost everywhere, the downturn in rights was driven by attacks on pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities—which harmed elections and sowed violence.” Similarly, the World Justice Project (WJP) highlights that authoritarian trends have pushed the world into a “rule of law recession” since 2016, with the global decline affecting 78% of countries. Its latest 2023 Index reveals that the rule of law factor experiencing the most significant decline between 2016 and 2023 is Fundamental Rights, down in 77% of countries.

Reflecting on the economic implications of populists in power, Funke et al. (2023) conclude that “on average, countries with populist regimes experience a significant decline in real GDP per capita. The erosion of democratic institutions, protectionist trade policies, and accelerated debt dynamics are typical characteristics of populism in power.” As the worst manifestation of arbitrariness and authoritarianism, when populists replace the so-called “establishment,” it leads to the erosion of governance structures and the exploitation of societal divisions, resulting in long-term instability and exacerbating both global and domestic divisions and polarizations.

Relating to the main topic of this article, the factors driving populism from both supply and demand sides have created a favorable environment for populist authoritarians to leverage it across borders. Domestically, populists often position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against perceived external threats, using nationalist sentiments and anti-

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<sup>2</sup> In the European Parliament elections held on June 6-9, 2024, far-right parties, with steady support growth, emerged as the leading force in the EP elections of France, Italy, and Austria. They also secured the second-largest party position in Germany and the Netherlands. Depending on various factors, the far-right party's significant first-place finish in France could foreshadow a final victory in upcoming elections. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' anti-immigration party saw a sixfold increase in votes compared to the previous election.

globalization grievances to consolidate power while potentially adopting a more aggressive stance in international relations.

Externally, populist authoritarians, under pressure to compete for influence and resources, resort to SPP, exerting significant local, national, international, and global impacts. Through sharp power tactics, they manipulate and influence other nations' political systems, economies, and societies via disinformation campaigns, cyber warfare, and economic leverage. These tactics include spreading disinformation, controlling social media narratives, and exerting economic pressure on other countries. Additionally, they may form alliances with other authoritarian regimes employing sharp power strategies, further destabilizing the international order (Walker & Ludwig, 2017, 2018, 2021).

In this context, populism becomes an integral component of SPP, reflecting the transnational activities of states in constructing and reaching out to their “peoples” beyond their national boundaries.

Unlike the soft power strategies of democratic nations, which rely on culture, values, and foreign policies to attract and persuade, shaping long-term global preferences and values, scholars like Cardenal (2017) and Nye (2018) define Sharp Power Politics (SPP) as the coercive influence of authoritarian regimes. SPP utilizes both hard and soft power elements, often manifesting as politics of diversion and manipulation to achieve strategic objectives. Embraced predominantly by populist authoritarian regimes, SPP rhetoric espouses vehemently anti-Western, anti-globalization, and anti-multilateralism positions to legitimize its discourse.

The world order described here neither prescribes equal rules for all nor ensures fairness even when the rules are uniformly applied. Many nations struggle within this system to advance their interests due to internal weaknesses and external constraints. As discontent accumulates, it becomes a tool for exploitation by authoritarian regimes. In this context, the creation of a "scapegoat" becomes inevitable, whether to address legitimate grievances or to obscure political, ideological, or governance failures. Populists, driven to divert attention beyond objective realities, tend to identify 'enemies' among elites, including business leaders, bureaucrats, scientists, and autonomous institutions like universities and regulatory bodies.

Internationally, adversaries are portrayed as 'foreign powers,' 'imperialists,' or entities like global capital and 'globalizers,' with specific targets often including the US, the West, certain ethnic or religious groups, and individuals such as George Soros. These regimes criticize multilateralism as biased toward Western interests and decry globalization as favoring the unrestrained agendas of multinational corporations.

To reinforce this narrative, populists advocate for a diverse and inclusive global order with equitable representation but simultaneously employ nationalist rhetoric emphasizing national sovereignty and the right to self-determination. In practice, through SPP, they relentlessly extend their national influence and justify repressive domestic policies. Once in power, they manipulate concepts of rights and representation to entrench their control, gradually reshaping the rules to perpetuate their authority indefinitely.

The Sharp Power Politics (SPP) implemented by authoritarian regimes is driven by two main factors: the growing power of the countries involved and the failure to fulfill bold promises, particularly in the face of economic shortcomings. Regarding power, large-scale countries with regional and global ambitions—such as the USA, Russia, and China—inevitably translate

their increasing economic strength and military might into political influence alongside more direct forms of control. As a Chinese proverb says, "The mountain grows with its foothills." In terms of domestic economic failures, when economic performance declines and domestic support wanes, authoritarian leaders with checkered pasts may resort to cross-border provocations to maintain their grip on power. In both scenarios, parties that rose to power through populist politics frequently turn to SPPs to address these challenges.

Finally, an important distinction must be made between democratic countries, where the rule of law prevails, and authoritarian regimes ruled by a single leader. Democratic nations gain people's support through cultural diplomacy, fostering admiration and creating a model that others may wish to emulate. In contrast, authoritarian regimes pursue their interests by undermining institutions and intimidating other leaders. The former approach aligns with "soft power politics," whereas the latter is defined as sharp power politics (SPP).

SPP primarily exploits the asymmetries between free and unfree systems, aiming to influence behavior and outcomes in democracies by restricting free expression and employing direct and indirect means of coercion, media manipulation, and self-censorship. According to Walker and Ludwig (2021), tactics such as co-opting cultural and educational systems and manipulating information through media control are designed to craft narratives that allow authoritarian regimes to distort political environments, infiltrate foreign political systems and societies, and shield themselves from external influence. However, as Cardenal et al. (2017) effectively demonstrate, these relentless and unlawful methods starkly violate both national and international legal norms.

### *From Populism to the Transnational Populism*

Relatedly, but also distinctively, *transnational populism* (TNP) builds on the principles of domestic populism and extends them across borders. It represents a form of populism that connects populist movements or leaders from different countries, creating "cross-border alliances" around shared nationalist or populist ideologies. For instance, European right-wing populist parties often collaborate on issues related to "sovereignty" and opposition to the European Union.

TNP employs similar anti-elite and anti-globalist rhetoric, but it unites individuals from multiple nations around a common cause, such as opposing immigration or combating perceived threats to national identity. This movement establishes "global networks" that emphasize "nationalism" but are bonded by shared concerns about globalization, technocracy, and external control by supranational entities.

TNP provides fertile ground and intellectual discourse for authoritarian regimes to secure cooperation from individuals, groups, and governments through SPP. This is achieved by strategically offering prestigious positions, power, money, and economic privileges. In this context, it is noteworthy that TNP discourse, which legitimately critiques the global governance system established after World War II—now diminished in function within the multipolar world that emerged, especially after the Cold War—has been incorporated into SPP strategies, often pursued through illegal and unethical means.

TNP is a form of populism that transcends the traditional nation-state framework. It addresses global issues and aims to mobilize citizens from multiple countries around a common cause or

against a shared 'elite' or 'establishment.' In doing so, it contributes to regional or global political shifts. The term has been applied to various movements and leaders who have sought to create cross-border solidarity among people, often in opposition to global institutions or policies perceived as elitist or undemocratic (Moffitt, 2017).

TNP is marked by populist rhetoric and strategies that resonate with widespread grievances or fears shared by diverse populations, irrespective of national contexts. It can also be viewed as a reaction to globalization and the perceived shortcomings of the international political system in addressing the needs and concerns of everyday people. By that nature, it advances by building alliances, exchanging tactics, and promoting similar narratives across countries or regions.

Although each power type possesses distinct characteristics, tools, and methods in international relations and can be wielded differently, as shown in the table, they all operate within a framework that capitalizes on political distrust and the erosion of public trust. They share a common theme of challenging elites and undermining democratic structures:

Firstly, SPP and TNP thrive on *global anti-establishment sentiment*, challenging established norms and institutions to advance their respective agendas. By appealing to emotions and identity, they aim to foster a sense of shared purpose against "others." In this regard, a common denominator emerges when these two realms of politics converge in challenging liberal democratic norms and embracing illiberal values.

Secondly, through sharp or populist policies, political leaders aim *to manipulate information* and narratives to influence public opinion. In this context, they also utilize social media to disseminate messages and connect with global audiences, often distorting facts to serve their agendas.

Thirdly, as part of their efforts to create "scapegoats" for a divide-and-rule strategy, they often *leverage nationalist sentiments* to garner domestic and international support under the guise of resisting perceived external influences or domination by foreign elites. In this context, they incite public sentiment against globalization, the West, and international institutions in the countries they seek to influence, regardless of their own country's stance. For instance, while China promotes the narrative—particularly in the context of BRI projects—that its financing approach differs from that of the IMF, it deliberately obscures the fact that, after the US, China holds the largest quota in the IMF and plays a significant role in shaping its policies.

Fourthly, their tactics contribute to *the erosion of international institutions and norms*, a trend frequently echoed by populist leaders who challenge the existing global order (Pinto, 2023).



**Box.1** SPP, Populism, TNP Compared

Characteristics	Populism	TNP	SPP	Overlapping Areas
<b>Key Focus</b>	National politics, anti-elite	Cross-border nationalist populism	Foreign interference, destabilization	Challenging the establishment
<b>Main Tools</b>	Rhetoric, mass mobilization	Cross-border networks, alliances	Disinformation, censorship, influence ops	Antielite mobilization & cross-border appeal
<b>Primary Actors</b>	Nationalist populist leaders	Global populist leaders	Authoritarian regimes	Populist leaders & authoritarian states support
<b>Impact on Democracy</b>	Erosion of democratic norms	Weakening of international system	Undermine democracy	Exploiting distrust in elites, weakening democracy

**Source:** Pinto (2023) and Wojczewski (2023).

Despite these commonalities, the contextualization of TNP is subject to serious theoretical challenges.

First, TNP necessitates shifting *the unit of analysis from the national to the global scale*, redefining the framework within which political phenomena are understood and evaluated.

Second, TNP is characterized by political movements and ideologies that aim to represent "the people" beyond national frontiers, requiring a transition *from the traditional concept of "national citizens" to that of "transnational people."*

Third, TNP prompts the *redefinition of establishment and/or elite within a global context*, challenging traditional conceptions rooted in national politics.

Fourth, it calls for *identifying political actors of opposition who advocate for the interests of these "global citizens"* against the perceived global establishment, thereby reshaping the landscape of political agency on a global scale.

Lastly, it entails *the development of rhetoric and ideologies* by these actors to mobilize and effect systemic change for the benefit of the broader masses of global citizens, signaling a departure from traditional nationalist or regionalist narratives (Möller, 2021; De Cleen et al., 2020).

One such effort is the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), launched by former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis. It aims to construct a transnational leftist political project to "democratize Europe." DiEM25's striking slogan, presented below, reflects the principles outlined above, albeit under limited conditions: *"Europe is ruled by oligarchs. They own the apartments we live in, the banks that keep our money, the drugs that save our lives, the apps we need to work, the data these apps collect about us, the oil and gas that heat our planet, and the politicians that were supposed to represent us. Only one thing can change that: a democratic revolution. Join us in building it"* (DiEM25, 2024).

Having described the emerging regional and global status quo as "techno-feudalism," Varoufakis elaborates on the emergence of a "novel form of capital," which he terms "cloud

capital”: “*Unlike conventional capital (e.g., electricity grids or tractors or industrial robots), which is a produced means of production, cloud capital is a produced means of modifying our behavior, e.g., making us desire commodities that it then sells to us directly (e.g., through Amazon), bypassing markets and, therefore, allowing the owners of this cloud capital (e.g., people like Jeff Bezos) to extract gigantic cloud rents from sellers and buyers. In this new mode of value extraction, where capitalism’s two pillars have been sidelined (market being replaced by digital platforms and profits by cloud rents), AI simply turbocharges the power of the owners of cloud capital – which are our era’s techno-feudal lords or, as I call them, our new cloudiest ruling class*” (DiEM, 2023).<sup>3</sup>

When evaluated in terms of the five yardsticks (scale, citizen, establishment, opposition, rhetoric) outlined above, DiEM25 fulfills many of them. DiEM25 positions itself as a political agent and opposition movement, representing the voice of the European citizen with a transborder identity. It also provides ideological rhetoric, primarily criticizing "the elite," which it defines as a European and even global elite comprising supranational institutions, transnational corporations, and various national governments that undermine their citizens’ sovereignty while collaborating with these institutions and corporations. However, DiEM25’s construction of a European "people" in opposition to an international elite raises questions about the potential of populism to transcend the nation-state.

DiEM25’s stance is rooted in a leftist ideology that advocates for systemic change through electoral processes, challenging the elite and establishment in favor of the common people's presumed aligned interests. Within this left-wing "thin" ideology, while charismatic leadership is not necessarily dismissed, the focus is on collective leadership and respecting institutional safeguards to prevent the emergence of a cult of personality or a shift toward autocratic rule. In this way, DiEM25 fulfills the fundamental elements of evolving populist theory.

However, DiEM25’s concept of a “European citizenry” has shaped the movement itself. To create influence and drive change, DiEM25 established its political party, the European Realistic Disobedience Front (MERA25), with the goal of sending representatives from several countries, including Germany, Greece, and Italy, to the European Parliament (EP). However, MERA25 was unable to secure any seats in the EP during the last elections in 2024, marking a significant setback.

To conclude this section, the emergence of populist authoritarian regimes emulating the SPP model is hardly unexpected. While these regimes possess distinct characteristics, they share a common theme of challenging elites and undermining democratic structures. Their tools and methods may differ, but they all operate within a framework that exploits political distrust and the erosion of public confidence in democratic norms and institutions.

Both SPP and TNP, as common threads, prioritize specific interests over universal principles, inevitably fostering the rise of authoritarianism and its methods. These developments highlight the need to address populism—traditionally tackled at the nation-state level—with a cross-border or transnational approach (Caiani & Graziano, 2022). In a multipolar world that promotes alternative norms and values, the fundamental similarity between populism and SPP lies in their shared inclination to infiltrate the established order within the confines of

<sup>3</sup> DiEM, <https://diem25.org/varoufakis-on-eu-economic-decline-us-china-brics-growth-and-technofeudalism/>

existing rules, gradually eroding it from within. This enables them to seize control of the system and reshape it to accommodate diverse interests, norms, and priorities.

## **On Chinese (Transnational) Populism**

Applying the given approach to populism in the case of China as an established authoritarian regime presents significant challenges. Such analysis needs to utilize the five generic yardsticks (scale, citizen, establishment, opposition, rhetoric) to maintain consistency. What is the *scale* of the so-called Chinese TNP? Is it limited to a country like the US, a region like the EU, or a global order such as the multilateral system? Who are the “*pure global citizens*” with perceived common and homogenous interests to defend? Who constitutes the global “*establishment*” and “*global elite*” to oppose and blame? Which *party, political movement, or leader* will spearhead this process? For instance, will CCP leader Xi Jinping represent global citizens with a “singular voice”? Furthermore, what is the main *ideology, model, or mechanism* through which major stakeholders will cooperate to represent and improve the destiny of global citizens? These questions require thorough exploration to understand the applicability of TNP in the Chinese context.

A plausible answer to some of these questions is relatively straightforward. Like DiEM25, China blames the so-called “Western imperialism,” global (American/Western) capitalists, and multinational corporations (MNCs) for fostering anti-global elite and establishment sentiment. In other words, China perceives the post-WWII rules-based multilateral governance system and its major institutions—such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—as components of the “global establishment.” Consequently, Chinese political leadership advocates for reforming and restructuring these systems to ensure better and fairer representation for global citizens. However, this approach contains several loopholes, as highlighted in the following aspects.

China has built its development trajectory since the 1980s on convergence with the global establishment through reforms and opening. The inconsistency in China's recent rhetoric about reshaping the global political-economic landscape, while having developed through integration into the existing global system, can be analyzed through several key points.

China's economic rise has been significantly enabled by the liberal international order, characterized by open markets, free trade, and multilateral institutions. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China initiated substantial economic reforms and embraced openness to the world. These reforms included liberalizing the economy, encouraging foreign investment, and integrating into the global trading system, notably through its accession to the WTO in 2001. These measures aligned with existing global rules and norms, driving China's rapid economic growth and development. The country has benefited immensely from global supply chains, foreign direct investment, and access to international markets. This alignment with the worldwide establishment provided the foundation for China's growth into the world's second-largest economy.

However, in recent years, particularly under Xi Jinping's leadership—elected on March 14, 2013, by the 12th National People's Congress in Beijing—China has adopted a more assertive stance regarding its role in global governance. This includes advocating for reforms to international institutions to better reflect the interests of developing countries. As Hillman

(2020) documented, alongside its alignment with the existing international order, China has also promoted alternative norms, values, standards, and initiatives. Significant efforts since the early 1990s include, but are not limited to, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, established in 2016), the New Development Bank (NDB, originally known as the BRICS Development Bank, established in 2015), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, initially called One Belt One Road, launched in 2013), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, originally the Shanghai Five, formed in 1995), and the Export and Import Bank of China (established in 1994). These initiatives aim to enhance China's global influence and support infrastructure development in various countries.

Based on these observations, the following assessment of China in the context of populism can be provided. First, the apparent contradiction between China's past convergence with the global establishment and its current calls for change can be viewed as a pragmatic approach to *realpolitik*. While China continues to benefit from the existing international order, its rhetoric reflects a strategic vision to enhance its influence and address perceived imbalances in global governance, reshaping it to better serve its strategic interests.

China's stance and rhetoric on global governance and institutional reform has evolved alongside its growing power. Initially, the country focused on integrating into and benefiting from the established order. As its economic and geopolitical clout increased, China began selectively engaging with global institutions, advocating for reforms in areas where it seeks greater influence while opposing changes that might undermine its strategic advantages. For example, China has called for increased voting power in the IMF and the World Bank to reflect its economic status but resists reforms in areas such as human rights, reciprocity-requiring issues, and cyberspace regulation. The inconsistency lies in simultaneously critiquing and benefiting from these institutions, selectively engaging in reforms, and promoting parallel alternatives with distinctly Chinese terms and conditions that align with its interests (Huang & Kurlantzick, 2020).

Second, China's authoritarian governance and state-centric diplomacy are fundamentally incompatible with populist strategies that rely on grassroots mobilization or democratic representation. Domestically, China enforces strict control over political expression and dissent, prioritizing stability and economic growth above democratic freedoms. This approach is mirrored in its international relations, where China emphasizes principles such as sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful coexistence, focusing on state-level interactions and avoiding direct engagement with opposition movements or criticism of other regimes. As a result, China does not advocate for democracy, human rights, or pluralism either domestically or internationally. Instead, it frequently aligns with regimes that share similar values, emphasizing economic and strategic interests over social or political advocacy. This approach contrasts with people-centric diplomacy, which prioritizes democracy, human rights, and individual empowerment.

Third, although populist rhetoric typically involves appealing to the general population and advocating for their interests against a perceived elite, it requires mechanisms for representation and participation, which are also absent in China's approach. Therefore, since a mechanism of representation and the notion of "pure citizens" are both absent in China's approach, it lacks a clear agenda to represent the global masses' interests or give them a voice against elites.

Fourth, besides the lack of an effective mechanism for representation to enable people to challenge power, China's approach does not fit the generic populist case because it fails to provide a proper conceptualization of "transnational people." Unlike the notion of "transnational people," which refers to the collective interests and identities of individuals across national boundaries, China focuses on state sovereignty and bilateral relations, sidelining the idea of a global citizenry with shared interests and rights. China's pragmatic approach highlights the inconsistency between its rhetorical claims of benefiting the global populace and its actual practices. With these characteristics, the so-called TNP of China neither resonates with the sentiments or aspirations of the "common people" nor fulfills the theoretical underpinnings of the evolving populist literature.

In summary, China lacks the moral and ideological legitimacy, as well as the broad appeal, to position itself as a global advocate for reforming the political-economic order. Its narrative of improving the global landscape for the "global citizen" falls short of typical populist rhetoric, focusing instead on state-to-state diplomacy and neglecting systemic reforms to enhance representation, human rights, or overall well-being. China's rhetoric aligns with its broader strategy to position itself as a leader of the Global South and a champion of development for all, contrasting itself with what it portrays as the self-serving policies of Western powers.

Finally, albeit theoretically unjustified, transnational or global populism and SPP can be interpreted as efforts by an authoritarian regime to survive both domestically and internationally through inexorable methods that do not comply with national or international law.

To conclude, when assessed against the basic principles of populism—such as the existence of a geopolitical scale, an establishment to oppose, a global citizenry whose rights are advocated, an opposition, and thin ideological rhetoric—it becomes evident that China, monopolized by the Communist Party, lacks a defined geographical or political scale, a global "people" it claims to represent, and an ideology that resonates with such a group. Consequently, it can be argued that a regime that has consolidated its authoritarianism can no longer pursue a populist agenda. In this context, China's "influence" beyond its borders should instead be associated with its SPP, driven by pragmatism and opportunism, even if it is adorned with inconsistent and incomplete populist rhetoric.

## **Linking China's Populism and Sharp Power Politics**

As populist governments tend toward authoritarianism, factors such as economic strength, military power, and imperialist ambitions may drive them to engage more actively in global power politics. These governments often divert attention from domestic issues by creating external threats. However, this shift does not inherently make them populist in the traditional sense. Therefore, the analysis underscores the need to differentiate between the so-called TNP and the emerging concept of SPP, as they are distinct yet overlapping phenomena.

The process that begins with populism at the national level and culminates in authoritarianism often extends its influence beyond borders, manifesting more as SPP than TNP. Despite employing populist rhetoric, China's actions are better characterized as pragmatism and opportunism, aimed at expanding its global influence and interests rather than adhering to a TNP strategy, either domestically or internationally. While populism typically operates within nations through electoral dynamics, SPP encompasses tactics

employed by authoritarian regimes beyond their borders. China's TNP appears more as a strategic maneuver to ease tensions while leveraging assertive SPP to extend its influence and advance its global agenda.

### *Misalignment Between SPP and TNP*

Emerging from Mao's era of oppression and global isolation, modern China has lacked significant soft-power elements such as attractive and persuasive economic, cultural, ideological, and institutional values. This deficit was exacerbated by events like the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, where hundreds or thousands of pro-democracy protesters were killed, and ongoing human rights abuses in its autonomous regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, further diminishing China's soft-power potential on the global stage. During his tenure from 2002 to 2012, Hu Jintao sought to address this by introducing the concept of "soft power" at the 7th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2007, signaling a shift towards emphasizing culture and core socialist values.

Since Xi Jinping's ascent to leadership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2013, and particularly following the 2018 constitutional amendment that enshrined his doctrine, *Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, into both the CCP program and the Chinese Constitution—enabling Xi to remain in power indefinitely—China's initial acknowledgment of the significance of soft power has evolved into increasingly sophisticated strategies for "influence creation." Consequently, Chinese authoritarian state capitalism has transitioned toward implementing sharp power politics (SPP) on a global scale.

Domestically, having consolidated power, the CCP has adopted a paternalistic approach, positioning itself as the sole representative of the people while dismissing class distinctions and conflicts of interest. In this context, Xi Jinping's heavy use of "populist discourse" to demonize and scapegoat intellectuals, lawyers, experts, and scientists—branding them as "alienated elites" opposed to the "patriotic people" due to their legitimate objections and criticisms—does not make him a populist in the traditional sense. Instead, it reflects the culmination of populist politics transitioning into authoritarianism. Xi Jinping's authoritarian model integrates elements of the past and present, embodying a state-capitalist regime with distinct "Chinese characteristics." This model has faced longstanding criticism from democratic countries, human rights organizations, the United Nations, and the European Commission for its human rights abuses. These include the detention of more than 1 million people in internment camps, re-education programs, restrictions on religious and cultural practices, forced labor schemes, mass surveillance, and the forced sterilization of women, particularly in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Muslim autonomous region.<sup>4</sup>

Despite denying Chinese citizens the right to explore alternative governance models, President Xi employs rhetoric that portrays China as a champion of oppressed nations, positioning it as morally superior. Xi's narrative frames capitalism as driven by greed, labels the US and the West as historical oppressors, and selectively rejects liberal multilateral governance principles while criticizing associated institutions. This strategy enhances China's image as a defender against global injustice (Mandip Singh, 2017). Domestically, Xi leverages civilizational and nationalistic populism to legitimize his governance, while

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/frustration-deepens-two-years-after-un-report-china-abuses-2024-08-31/#:~:text=The%202022%20report%20said%20the,he%20stood%20by%20the%20document.>

internationally, he emphasizes policies of non-interference, national independence, sovereignty, and cultural distinctions to justify China's foreign policy and bolster the regime's legitimacy.

However, empirical evidence on China's evolving practices contradicts this narrative. Domestically rooted populist elements have transformed into tools of SPP to expand China's global influence. Using "carrot-and-stick" policies, China employs a mix of covert hard and soft power tactics to foster dependency and elicit favorable political responses, manipulating, pressuring, and coercing others to adopt its norms and values (Walker & Ludwig, 2017 & 2021). Disparities between free and unfree systems further enable China to exploit systemic frictions, capitalizing on the discrepancies between open democratic nations and its closed authoritarian regime.

The recently developed China Index Initiative (CII) maps China's influence across various countries worldwide, reinforcing the arguments mentioned above. It evaluates nine key fields, each with ten guiding questions, focusing on China's efforts to exert influence: media, foreign policy, academia, domestic politics, economy, technology, society, military, and law enforcement. Through the lenses of exposure, pressure, and effect, these efforts involve practices such as censorship, manipulation, and the erosion of the integrity of independent institutions (Cook, 2022; Walker, 2018; Cardenal et al., 2017). This strategic approach is rooted in the CCP's longstanding campaigns to reshape ideology. It includes coercive tactics such as propaganda, disinformation dissemination, and using soft power tools to influence targeted groups. Ultimately, these efforts spread confusion to undermine democratic values, weaken democratic institutions, and bolster authoritarianism domestically.

Among other examples, Germany represents a generic case of China's influence in Europe and among developed countries worldwide (Weidenfeld, 2022). As mentioned above, exploiting a country's one-sided openness is China's central strategy for exerting influence over Germany and other liberal democracies. In Germany's case, the most vulnerable domains are academia and media. Germany ranked as the second most influenced in academia among the 36 surveyed countries. The index evaluates how PRC entities shape public debate and media coverage about China in the surveyed country (Chtayti, 2022). The proverbial Achilles' heel lies in institutional partnerships, financial and personnel support, and talent recruitment programs offered by China. Media was the second most adversely affected field, with Germany ranking as the fourth most influenced, tied with Australia.

China's endeavors to exert influence exhibit characteristics of "sharp power," as they are driven by an authoritarian regime focusing on infiltration and distortion of information. President Xi employs various rhetorical maneuvers to achieve several objectives, including deflecting blame onto external entities for domestic or foreign policy shortcomings, legitimizing authoritarian rule and human rights abuses, and collaborating with like-minded countries, such as Russia, for media manipulation and academic repression. As noted in the Federal Government's 2023 report, these actions aim to reshape the global political-economic landscape and amplify China's influence within international institutions. Historically, the deployment of sharp power can be viewed as a modern adaptation of China's historical "tribute system," which facilitated trade and foreign relations while asserting China's hegemonic role (Millward, 2023). In contemporary terms, sharp power reflects China's aspirations for global dominance and a modern iteration of hierarchical relations, rooted in its longstanding sense of superiority.

Finally, having failed to meet the fundamental requirements of a TNP, China's foreign policy rhetoric is more accurately framed within the context of SPP. The widespread use of populist discourse serves to establish a foundation for SPP, adopting an opportunistic approach.

### *Empirical Evidence on China's SPP*

China exploits systemic asymmetries with democratic countries, leveraging media influence and institutional partnerships to pressure self-censorship and silence dissent within press, academic, and student communities. This is evident in the monitoring, reporting, and pressuring of individuals who do not align with the CCP's goals. Several key agents executing China's SPP in the West and beyond can be identified.

The United Front, in collaboration with Chinese diplomatic missions and organizations such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), seeks to control and influence China-related research, conferences, and publications. This includes intimidating and politically monitoring Chinese students while undermining principles of free speech and academic freedom. Confucius Institutes, presented as cultural organizations akin to the British Council, function as extensions of China's authoritarian regime, advancing Beijing's political interests on Western campuses and beyond (Weidenfeld, 2022).

One recent example highlights China's "reputation laundering" efforts, even in distant locations such as Germany. In October 2021, a promotional event for the biography *Xi Jinping: The Strongest Man in the World* was canceled at an academic institution partially funded by Confucius Institutes. This incident caused significant concern across Europe, as it underscored the taboo surrounding criticism of Xi Jinping within academic circles and China's commitment to suppressing dissent through its sharp power politics (SPP) (Fulda, 2021).

The intervention raised serious alarm about the role of Confucius Institutes as the "long arm" of an authoritarian regime, censoring academia and civil society. Not surprisingly, academic and political debates escalated over the need to terminate partnerships with these institutes. In response, several academics called for the closure of Confucius Institutes in Germany to safeguard academic freedom. Universities in Hamburg and Düsseldorf have already shut down their Confucius Institutes.

Equally significant is the involvement of the European Union, which issued a call inviting universities within the EU to apply for Horizon funding, specifically for initiatives aimed at developing independent knowledge about China. Several German universities joined consortia bidding for funds, with academics noting it is essential to have organizations if partnerships with Confucius Institutes come under fire.

### *Sharp Power Politics (SPP) along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*

On broadest level, China's influence creation progresses along three pathways. First, by promoting an image of an egalitarian and pluralistic China, the CCP positioned the country as a champion of nations' dignity, independence, and development. Second, relatedly, China also selectively demands the reform of international organizations, like the United Nations (UN), IMF, the World Bank, World Health Organization, and the World Trade Organization



(WTO) to align with its interests and representation, leveraging its financial contributions to these institutions. Third, simultaneously, China has created a parallel landscape to the Western-centered international order, aiming to expand its sphere of influence unilaterally.

**The significance of the BRI:** Beijing's escalating challenge to the Western-led liberal multilateral order has become increasingly evident, not only through its representation in international platforms like the G7 and its growing influence within institutions such as the IMF and World Bank but also through its leadership in BRICS and the establishment of new institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (Chu, 2022). Among these areas of influence, the most groundbreaking initiative is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. The BRI is a multidimensional initiative that provides China with economic, political, and strategic leverage, significantly expanding its influence.

BRI's economic as well as political rationale for China is obvious. First, experts point to the need to rebalance China's evolving national, regional, and global development trajectory (Ho, 2021). Specifically, this involves redirecting economic activities from the highly saturated and costly coastal regions to the underdeveloped western provinces, addressing the slowdown in the Chinese economy. Second, regionally, the BRI aims to serve as an engine for regional economic integration by connecting neighboring countries to various regions of China through infrastructure corridors, such as the Pakistan Gwadar economic corridor, oil and gas pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and railways extending to Europe via Russia. These projects contribute positively to globalization (China Power Team, 2017). Third, the initiative strategically addresses overcapacity issues in heavy industries and manages excess foreign reserves. Fourth, since being incorporated into China's constitution in 2018 and included in the 14th Five-Year Plan in 2021, the BRI has become a central pillar of China's foreign economic policy.

Beyond addressing China's economic needs, expanding its geopolitical influence, and shaping the global order according to its norms and values, the BRI also aligns with the interests of regional countries and the global appetite for cooperation. The initiative aims to enhance multidimensional transnational connectivity, particularly in Eurasia, while extending to Africa, South America, and beyond. This is achieved through governance mechanisms that promote effective cooperation in infrastructure development, human connectivity, policy coordination, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and cyberspace collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

The term "connectivity" is used in a multidimensional sense to address:

**Transportation:** Developing highways, railways, airlines, logistics centers, and ports across Asia, especially in regions surrounding China.<sup>6</sup>

**Cyberspace:** Enhancing cooperation in information and data flow, as well as cybersecurity, in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

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<sup>5</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The BRI comprises a Silk Road Economic Belt – a trans-continental passage that links China with south east Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe by land – and a 21st century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route connecting China's coastal regions with South East and South Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East and Eastern Africa, all the way to Europe. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

**Trade and Finance:** Facilitating measures to increase trade, financial transactions, and investments across the mentioned markets.

**Free Trade Zones:** Establishing free trade and industrial zones to unify diverse economic areas.

**Human and Cultural Exchange:** Improving institutional, cultural, and human communication and dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

As of April 2023, 149 countries had joined the BRI by signing Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). Due to China's lack of comprehensive data on investment projects across all BRI partner countries, conflicting figures exist regarding its overall engagement. Based on transactional data estimates, the value of China's investment and construction projects in 147 BRI countries reached approximately 67.8 billion US dollars in 2022. This figure is significantly lower than pre-COVID-19 levels, when annual investments exceeded 100 billion US dollars. However, during the same period, the share of BRI countries in China's total outbound investment and foreign trade increased.<sup>8</sup>

China's investment in BRI countries in 2023 reached its highest level since 2018, marking an almost 80 percent increase compared to 2022, with Chinese companies directing nearly \$50 billion into overseas projects.<sup>9</sup> According to the Green Finance and Development Center, the total engagement comprises approximately \$600 billion in construction contracts and \$420 billion in non-financial investments.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to investing in numerous unprofitable infrastructure projects, China's apparent generosity in granting credit as a key feature of the BRI has led several debtor countries to struggle with loan repayment. According to Chinese official figures released in 2024, debt owed to the Export-Import Bank of China by BRI participant countries has surpassed \$300 billion, out of China's total engagement of approximately \$1 trillion since the BRI's inception. This troubling trend prompted China to shift its policy toward "small and elegant" projects, which less frequently involve large-scale infrastructure construction.<sup>11</sup>

**Major Issues Along the BRI:** The texts and documents associated with the BRI include numerous appealing but ambiguous statements, such as "community of shared destiny," "harmonious society," "collaborative globalization," "mutual consultation," "joint construction," "shared benefits," "respect for national sovereignty," and "equality between partner countries." Despite these decorative phrases, perspectives on the BRI vary widely, with countries, institutions, and individuals expressing differing levels of optimism or suspicion. Several influential China experts interpret the BRI as a geostrategic pursuit of hegemony, while others view it as China's attempt to lead a new era of globalization on its own terms, marked by the ideology of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," a slogan first popularized by Deng Xiaoping and reiterated since 2013.

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<sup>7</sup> EBRD, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/10273/the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/#topicOverview>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-05/chinese-investment-into-bri-nations-hits-highest-since-2018?embedded-checkout=true>

<sup>10</sup> <https://greenfdc.org/?cookie-state-change=1730129693591>

<sup>11</sup> <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-20/BRI-s-small-and-beautiful-projects-ensure-sustainable-development-1o28L42jQXu/index.html>

The BRI introduces nothing novel regarding indigenous systems, models, or governance. Instead, it rebrands China's ongoing financing and investment activities. In its current form, the BRI lacks transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, specialized departments, and a formal procedure for proposing or participating in projects. It also lacks a headquarters, presidency, secretariat, election system, or mechanisms for the participation of other countries in its management.

The Chinese side presents two major arguments for the BRI's institutional weaknesses. First, China is a relatively new and inexperienced actor in creating, leading, and managing large-scale global or regional projects with the characteristics of global public goods. While the approach of "the caravan lines up on the road" has seemingly inspired the notion of "he who pays gets the whistle," the BRI's growth trajectory amid ongoing power transitions, rising multipolarity, and evolving norms and values reflects a willingness to learn through a trial-and-error process.

Second, its "minimum institutional structure" may sometimes provide more effective managerial solutions. Grimmel and Li (2018) argue that, unlike traditional multi-level models (such as those seen in the European and Soviet experiences) or network governance models (as observed in Asia), the BRI's hybrid model allows for a more dynamic response to the unique challenges and complexities of the emerging multiplex world. Unlike the EU's static and rigid structure, which can impede adaptation to changing circumstances, the BRI's small bureaucracy, absence of a requirement for unanimous consensus, and increased flexibility enable it to respond more effectively to dynamically evolving situations, making it more adaptive and sustainable (Jessop, 2013a/b).

This argument holds merit, especially given the difficulties in achieving consensus on standardized compulsory rules due to regional and cultural diversity, varying levels of development, and lingering mistrust between countries arising from ongoing challenges or disputes. By refraining from delegating certain sovereign rights to a higher authority, the BRI not only upholds national sovereignty and respects the autonomous decision-making of individual nations but also, through its MoU framework, employs a relatively informal structure that facilitates non-binding joint decisions. This approach ensures voluntary participation from countries with diverse economic levels, priorities, and capacities, encouraging them to contribute their unique strengths toward collective decisions for mutual benefit. It fosters a "win-win" outcome for stakeholders within a community united by a shared destiny on equal terms (Hillman, 2020).

A more cautious yet realistic perspective suggests that, first, the BRI's hybrid structure reflects China's development of alternative institutions that both compete with and cooperate with Western organizations. Second, it raises concerns about the potential exploitation of the BRI's numerous "institutional loopholes," given China's asymmetric power and capacity relative to more vulnerable and fragile member states. Ozturk (2020) highlights two related asymmetries along the BRI. One pertains to the systemic asymmetries between China and the democratic West, which might enable China to align the BRI with SPP. The BRI emerged as President Xi Jinping actively promoted the "rejuvenation of a socialist-capitalist accumulation regime with Chinese characteristics" in 2013. This system integrates a heavily regulated market, limited property rights, a growing presence of state-owned enterprises in the economy, and the severe suppression of fundamental human and democratic rights. The dilemma stems from China's repressive and authoritarian political-economic system at home, which has expanded ambitiously abroad. Consequently, China aims to reshape the global

system according to its interests amid the rising multipolar world order. Thus, the primary challenge, devoid of demagoguery or populist rhetoric, is to elucidate how fundamental governance elements—such as openness, transparency, participation, fair competition, and mutual exchange—can coexist with such systemic asymmetry.

The second asymmetry relates to the BRI's "absentee governance," which emerges once member countries agree to China's complex and poorly understood terms and conditions in the MoU. Contrary to China's narrative of "voluntary participation" in the BRI, evidence suggests that, through various power manipulations and indirect pressures, governments are often "forced" to sign the document to engage in business with China. In other words, the BRI has become an unwritten and hidden prerequisite for collaborating with China. These asymmetries exacerbate participation constraints, as most small and fragile developing countries—unlike a few influential Western nations and global corporations that can negotiate terms with Chinese bureaucrats and politicians—are initially attracted by cheap financial incentives but often face costly consequences later. These consequences may include the potential loss of national strategic assets to China.

China's approach may seem easy at the beginning but proves costly in the long run. The uncertainties and flexibility inherent in the BRI's weak institutional structure, coupled with global circumstances, allow for negotiation and maneuvering when necessary, reflecting Chinese pragmatism and opportunism (Carmody & Wainwright, 2022).

As a third element, the implementation of Chinese norms and standards in infrastructure projects across diverse regions adds a complex layer to business operations. This approach is particularly challenging in sectors like railways, roads, and ports, where regulatory and technical standards must be adapted to fit local contexts. Although Chinese companies are sometimes driven toward adopting global governance models—partly due to resistance from mature Western partners—the alignment with "good governance" principles remains intricate. Specifically, these projects often face challenges in integrating financial regulatory practices, environmental protections, and labor standards that align with international norms. The overarching goal is to ensure that financial and investment practices strike a balance between economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability.

In this context, the issue of "extraterritoriality" and the sectoral and geographic overstretch of BRI projects form the focal point of debates. Key stakeholders, including multilateral development banks, national development banks, and Chinese institutions, are actively working to harmonize standards and regulations. The relationship between the European Union (EU) and China concerning the BRI is particularly significant, involving discussions and negotiations over the application and alignment of standards. For instance, EU standards may be perceived as extraterritorial if applied outside the EU, which could be viewed as an imposition from a Chinese perspective. Conversely, Chinese standards applied outside China might be considered extraterritorial from a European perspective. This effort to establish a "common core" of standards aims to align practices and facilitate the smooth implementation of BRI projects.<sup>12</sup> In summary, China's technical and regulatory standards within the BRI are part of a broader framework of transnational governance, striving to balance national interests with international cooperation and development objectives.

On the other hand, the sectoral and geographic overstretch also limits the BRI's ability to function as a global public good. Combined with unresolved principal-agent issues arising from the lack of a robust institutional structure and managerial challenges due to undefined sectoral and geographic boundaries, these factors present significant long-term obstacles for the BRI. This situation results in what has been termed an "elephant syndrome," where the BRI has an ever-expanding body (qualitative growth) but a disproportionately small brain (contract-based sustainable governance) to control it (Ozturk, 2020). Previous experiences in creating global public goods for cooperation suggest that overcrowded platforms lacking clear territorial boundaries, focused areas of interest, and narrowly defined goals may struggle to achieve long-term success (OECD, 2018). Consequently, establishing more focused and narrowly defined geographic coverage should be prioritized as the number of participating countries continues to grow.

Due to these issues, following an initial period of remarkable expansion, Chinese state-led BRI lending for significant infrastructure investment programs—including ports, roads, railways, airports, power plants, and telecommunications networks—has lost momentum since 2019. Key factors contributing to this slowdown include the COVID-19 pandemic, financial payment issues in member countries, and concerns over the quality of BRI projects. Beyond these conjuncture-related factors, the initiative has faced inherent limitations and mounting criticisms arising from its rapid expansion. Evaluating the outcomes of early transactions, reflecting on past actions, rectifying mistakes, and adopting a fresh perspective have become imperative (Schulhof et al., 2022; Nedopil, 2024).

Despite these potential issues, there have been positive developments reflecting both the BRI's learning-by-doing approach and the changing demands of local governments, along with increasing resistance fueled by growing awareness of the negative aspects of BRI projects in many countries. For instance, by emphasizing "high-quality investment," the BRI has begun incorporating greater use of project finance, risk mitigation tools, and green finance. In 2023, China's overseas BRI engagement focused significantly on renewable energy, mining, and related technologies, with notable growth in the technology, metals, and mining sectors compared to 2022. These sectors are particularly relevant to the green transition, including lithium production and battery manufacturing for electric vehicles. Notably, China's energy-related engagement in 2023 was the greenest in both absolute and relative terms since the BRI's inception, reaching \$8 billion (UNDP & China Development Bank, 2019; Wang, 2023, 2024; Umbach, 2022).

Despite recent efforts to promote high-quality investment and market orientation, several issues persist:

**Lack of Inclusiveness, Openness, and Participation:** Weak local contributions have led to asymmetric relations and principal-agent problems, resulting in significant flaws such as unsustainable debt, labor policy issues, performance delays, and national security concerns. Approximately 270 (32%) out of 1,814 total BRI projects since 2013 have faced these challenges. Notably, nearly 90% of Chinese-funded projects are carried out by Chinese companies, while only 7.6% are implemented by host/local companies and 3.4% by foreign (non-Chinese, non-hosting) companies. In contrast, multilateral development banks allocate 29%, 41%, and 30% to these respective actors. This disparity highlights the gap between China's claims of "winning together and fair distribution" and the reality, undermining the notion of the BRI as a genuine "win-win" initiative (Carmody & Wainwright, 2022).

**Unpredictable Costs and Overdependence:** China's contributions are not clearly unconditional or cheaper than Western multilateral development financing, contrary to Chinese authorities' claims. While Western contracts typically offer predictable costs from start to finish, BRI projects often start with lower initial costs but become more expensive over time. In a sample of 95 large Chinese road and rail transport projects over the past three decades, actual construction costs averaged 30.6% higher than estimated. Countries like Venezuela, Montenegro, Ukraine, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Pakistan, Djibouti, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, which sought Chinese assistance, have since requested renegotiations to reduce project sizes and financial outlays—albeit at the cost of continued over-dependence on China.

**Inconsistent Debt Responses and Sovereignty Issues:** China's responses to debtor nations have been inconsistent and have not adhered to the best practices established by international lenders working with developing countries. In some instances, debts have been forgiven; in others, China has demanded disputed territories, infrastructure control, or the transfer of strategic assets as compensation (Financial Times, April 15, 2019 and June 25, 2020; Nikkei Asian Review, May 23, 2019). For example, in Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port was transferred to Chinese control (The New York Times, June 25, 2018), while in Tajikistan, the strategically significant Wakhan Corridor and several mining fields containing gold and uranium deposits were ceded to China in exchange for debt relief. These transactions have triggered significant political turmoil in the affected countries (The National Interest, August 23, 2018; Financial Times, May 2, 2019). With such practices, the BRI undermines the principle of sovereignty in many developing nations, depriving them of opportunities for long-term, self-sustaining growth (Chandran, 2019). The arguments supporting China's so-called model of bilateral bargaining, dialogue, and broad consultation—encapsulated in the motto "One BRI, many recipes"—have failed to address the pressing issues of collective action and agency. As a result, not only has competition among member states intensified, but the envisioned cooperation within the framework of the BRI has also remained underdeveloped and premature (Brombal, 2018)

**Environmental Sustainability and CSR Challenges:** Despite China's ambitions to make the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) more environmentally sustainable, achieving this goal is challenging due to a lack of reliable data. Lohse (2019) found that nearly 75 percent of Chinese companies operating abroad fail to disclose Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports, which serve as a proxy for assessing sustainability shortcomings. China's state-centric CSR approach, characterized by close ties between the state and the business community, positions CSR as a key strategy in public diplomacy. However, this approach risks portraying Chinese companies as extensions of the government, potentially damaging China's image and foreign relations. Moreover, state ownership and CEO political connections further dilute the positive impact of CSR initiatives. To address these issues, the Chinese government must continue to promote CSR policies abroad and encourage companies to fully internalize these practices as integral corporate values (Wang et al., 2023).

### **SPP in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

China has utilized the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand its influence and reinforce domestic control, employing Sharp Power Politics (SPP) to reshape partner countries'

political and cultural landscapes. The BRI reflects Chinese norms and values, with China's technical and regulatory standards influencing markets to align with its interests, thereby escalating Cold War-like tensions.

SPP is evident in China's manipulation of media, education, and political environments in BRI partner countries. The theoretical equality among partner nations often erodes, with China exerting significant control over project terms and conditions. For example, poorly managed contracts have raised concerns about regional influence, military expansion, and debt-trap diplomacy.

Over time, the BRI's structure has become distinctly "Chinese-like," fostering dependencies that align with China's interests. In democratic nations such as Australia and Germany, as well as in developing countries, criticism of China has often provoked retaliatory responses, including trade threats. China's approach to "dialogue," which favors closed-door negotiations, frequently conflicts with democratic norms of transparency.

The "Chinese way" of project implementation often means that society lacks full visibility into BRI projects, as they are not always evaluated for their environmental or economic impact. In democratic societies, this opacity raises concerns among stakeholders, making authoritarian regimes easier partners for China in BRI collaborations.

As project costs and risks emerge—such as environmental damage, debt burdens, and local conflicts—China leverages these projects for strategic advantage. Debt-for-equity swaps and similar agreements transfer control to China, promoting a "hub-and-spoke" system with China at the center, thereby undermining multilateral cooperation.

## Examples of SPP in BRI Countries

**Media Control:** Chinese media alliances in countries like Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Kenya promote pro-BRI narratives, shaping public opinion and avoiding sensitive topics.

**Academic Influence:** Confucius Institutes and funded programs in Malaysia, Kenya, and Germany foster favorable views of China while restricting critical discourse on issues such as Taiwan and Xinjiang.

**Surveillance Technology:** In Ecuador and Serbia, Chinese surveillance systems, ostensibly deployed for public safety, are reportedly used for monitoring and control.

**Debt Diplomacy:** Projects like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port and infrastructure in the Maldives illustrate debt-for-control tactics, where financial burdens lead to strategic concessions favoring China.

**Political Coercion:** Economic aid to Malaysia and Cambodia often translates into political support for Chinese objectives, such as in South China Sea disputes.

**Cultural Influence:** Confucius Institutes in Greece and Central Asia shape education and culture to align with Chinese policies.

In conclusion, China's sharp power strategy within the BRI creates asymmetric dependencies that favor Chinese interests while undermining democratic and environmental standards. This approach benefits select political actors but poses risks to citizens and global stability.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This article argues that China's efforts to shape a China-centered world order through populist discourse and carve out space for its SPP do not make it a "transnational populist country," as the evolving literature on populism understands it. Rather than addressing the interests of "international citizens with homogeneous interests," in the vein of Karl Marx's proletariat versus bourgeoisie narrative against the global establishment, China's approach is rooted in state-to-state diplomacy. It avoids addressing topics like democracy, human rights, and political representation.

The BRI provides a compelling illustration of how China aligns its SPP with broader economic, political, and cultural strategies. The intersection of the BRI and China's SPP can be summarized as follows:

**Economic Leverage:** Infrastructure investments create dependencies that translate into political influence. Through debt-trap diplomacy, for instance, China offers loans that are difficult for recipient countries to repay, enabling it to secure favorable terms in trade, diplomacy, or military cooperation.

**Strategic Partnerships:** Often formalized through MoUs, these partnerships include clauses on political and economic cooperation. China leverages economic investments in international forums and bilateral negotiations to garner support for its political positions, such as the One-China policy, or to deter partners from criticizing its human rights record in regions like Xinjiang.

**Cultural and Ideological Influence:** Confucius Institutes and other cultural centers promote Chinese culture, softening its global image. Through investments in media outlets, China spreads favorable narratives about its policies and development model, countering Western criticism and presenting its governance model as a viable alternative.

**Digital Silk Road:** By developing fiber optic cables, 5G networks, and e-commerce platforms, China gains control over critical technological infrastructure in BRI countries. Exporting surveillance technology to these countries also builds strategic security partnerships and extends China's influence over data and information flows.

**Geopolitical Strategy:** While primarily economic, the BRI occasionally facilitates military footholds, as seen with China's naval base in Djibouti. Additionally, China promotes stability in regions critical to the BRI by mediating conflicts and offering economic incentives to encourage peace, thereby safeguarding its investments and supply chains.

By integrating these strategies, China effectively uses the BRI to expand its influence, balancing economic development with strategic political objectives. This multifaceted



approach allows China to project power subtly yet effectively, leveraging economic means to achieve broader geopolitical goals.

The following policy recommendations could improve outcomes for BRI stakeholders:

**Enhancing Communication:** Continuous communication between China and its partners can foster mutual understanding and help avoid suboptimal outcomes.

**Institutionalization of the BRI:** Western stakeholders should advocate for further institutionalization of the BRI to prevent its exploitation by small, fragile regimes.

**Demanding Reciprocity:** Major partners should press China to adhere to the principle of reciprocity in trade, investment, property rights, and other areas.

**Integrating BRI with National Plans:** Recipient countries should incorporate BRI projects into their national development strategies to ensure local contributions and sustainability, avoid asymmetric dependence on China, and protect citizens from exploitation by local elites with Chinese funds.

**Strengthening Democratic Collaboration:** Democratic countries must coordinate to counter disinformation, reaffirm democratic values, and bolster their soft-power efforts both domestically and internationally.

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