

Book Review

Ferguson, R. James. 2021. *Greening China's New Silk Roads: The Sustainable Governance of Belt and Road*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

*Reviewed by Usman Ashraf**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes referred to as the New Silk Road(s), is a multibillion-dollar Chinese development initiative that aims to link Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas through investments in transportation, trade, energy, ports, health care, and information and communication technology infrastructure. Along with stand-alone projects, the BRI also includes six economic corridors that form the road part, while maritime connections make up the belt part. To date, around 147 countries have signed on to the project or indicated an interest in doing so. This represents about two-thirds of the world's population and about 40 percent of global gross domestic product.

Since its inception in 2013 by Xi Jinping, the human and financial cost of the potential environmental damage of such an enormous development initiative has raised many concerns. These concerns have resulted in the "greening of the BRI," which includes the inclusion of environmental parameters in infrastructure development under the BRI. The push to green the BRI has emerged from two parallel processes. First, the rapid infrastructure development in China over the last three decades has resulted in the destruction of ecosystems and pollution of air and water. Second, strong criticism from environmental advocacy groups has made it clear that a project of such scale can have huge ecological impacts on a global scale. The earlier process resulted in the emergence of local groups advocating for a clean environment, and those debates redirected infrastructure development toward a sustainable development model. The domestic reforms toward sustainable development are influenced by what is referred to as *eco-civilization* (24), a concept through which "economic, social, and developmental policies, along with associated foreign relations issues, have been integrated" (24). China's domestic ecological reforms are expanding on a global scale through the BRI. The scale of intervention under the BRI presents multiple opportunities and challenges for China to green the initiative, however. It is within this debate that this book attempts to engage and outline the detailed multifaceted challenges of greening the BRI. The possibilities and challenges of greening China's Silk Road are presented as a three-part argument: environmental, security, and global governance.

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The first part of the argument aims to understand the domestic transition happening inside China, shifting from cutthroat, high-paced infrastructure development to a greener and more environmentally sustainable development model. These changes include but are not limited to governance, policy, and legal interventions under the eco-civilization framework. The book demonstrates, through the example of the China–Central Asia–West Asia economic corridor, how the eco-civilization framework is being internationalized through the BRI.

The second part of the argument draws our attention to contested economic engagements in the Indo-Pacific region. The book outlines in detail the competitive regionalism that has put the win-win narrative of the BRI under intense scrutiny. In particular, the exploitation of marine resources has pitted China against many Indo-Pacific states, which view China's practices as unsustainable and a threat to their economy and the livelihood of fisherfolk. Economic and security interests have made China a major security stakeholder in Eurasia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific.

The third part of the argument shifts the focus from a regional to a geopolitical scale and draws our attention to emerging geopolitical contestations between China and other states. These geopolitical contestations arise from the fear that the BRI has the potential to influence the global order. The new globalism of China, due to the BRI, inevitably pushes China to engage with regional powers, such as Australia, India, and Japan. These engagements present substantial governance challenges to China's globalism under the BRI. At the same time, these challenges provide China with an opportunity to transform its soft power and influence, projecting itself as a global leader. In such a context, China faces a paradox. It needs to engage with opposing countries for the cogovernance of the BRI, but due to contested regionalism, it has failed to do so.

The book provides a detailed view that China's nuanced web of relations with different states creates new patterns of asymmetric interdependence and increased power diffusion. These processes can result in the evolution of a "soft" hierarchy of multipolar and multilateral relations. A key question in this discussion is whether "eco-civilization" can provide a cogovernance framework that shapes the relationship between China and other countries participating in the BRI. Without such a framework, there is a chance that the BRI may turn into an "asymmetric exploitation" of other countries as polluting industries and practices are exported to the Global South.

The book does provide a detailed and rich analysis of some regions, as well as emerging global patterns of governance. Such an ambitious endeavor comes at a cost to the precision of the argument, however. For example, the first part of the book outlines and engages with environmental issues in a very explicit way. However, the second and third parts move to international relations, security, cogovernance, and related issues. This leaves the reader guessing about the connection between these parts. This is not to say that there is no link, but the link has not been well established. This is the reason that the conceptual

framework of eco-civilization used to explain the greening of the BRI appears to be missing in the second and third parts of the book and only reappears in the conclusion.

Second, the book could benefit from establishing a distinction between *eco-civilization* and *sustainable development*. These terms have been used interchangeably; however, the concepts have emerged from different schools of thought. Conflating them makes the reader wonder why *eco-civilization* is used as a concept if it means the same thing as *sustainable development*. Overall, though, the book is a good source of detailed information about the geopolitical, governance, and environmental challenges of the BRI.