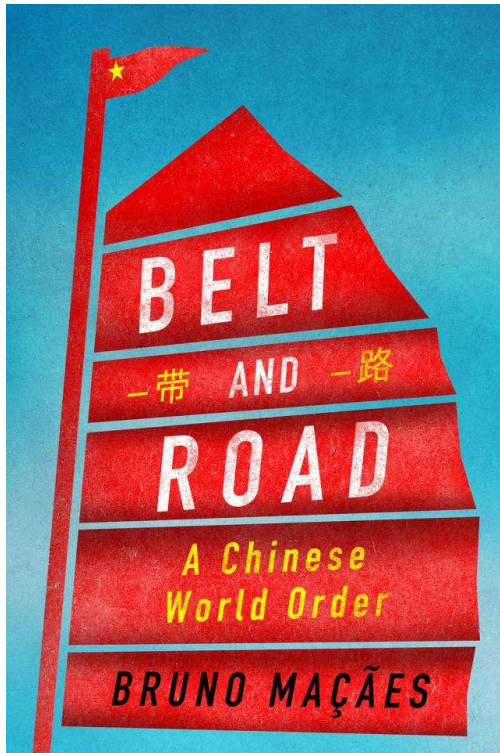


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## **Review: Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order by Bruno Maçães — will China rule the world?**

*It's time to worry about the country's expansionist plans, says Roger Boyes*

Roger Boyes

This summer the first residents moved in to Forest City, so called because it had been hacked out of the Malaysian jungle. In ten years, says Bruno Maçães, it will have one million inhabitants. Skyscrapers are being completed after a week of day-and-night construction. It is part of a world that is being built outside China, but according to Chinese rules and in pursuit of a Chinese dream. Maçães is too delicate a writer to state the obvious: you would have to be mad or desperate to live there.

As the city takes shape, four social strata are emerging. At the top of the heap there are wealthy Chinese looking for a safe haven for their cash and air they can breathe without the help of a mask. All the signs are in Mandarin. Then come the enablers who provide health and education. These too are Chinese, although the British may be hired to run a posh prep school. The third level comprises security guards, Nepalese mainly. And finally there are the Bangladeshis and Indians, who build, repair and clean — the invisibles.

Forest City is part of Beijing's Belt and Road strategy as it spreads its neocolonial tentacles across 70 countries. China's rush to become a superpower, to dictate the terms of a new world order, entails building deep sea ports, sometimes in places that don't need them, securing supply chains, finding ways of protecting the maritime lanes that carry the vessels of the world's largest trading nation. It means helping Zimbabwe to become a surveillance state and getting involved in countries that supply the rare metals needed for a growing economy. It means awarding new geostrategic roles to countries it wants to retain as client states — Kazakhstan as China's gateway to Europe, Pakistan as the gateway to the Indian Ocean, Djibouti the gateway to eastern Africa.

All this Maçães describes in the spiky aphoristic language familiar to readers of his first book, *The Dawn of Eurasia*. Forest City is described as resembling the world of "Chinese science fiction writer Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* with a splash of Plato's *Republic*". With Maçães you know that this isn't a bid for a mention in Pseuds Corner, but that he really has read Hao and Plato and wants to conjure up a hyper-modern and classical dystopia. Maçães, Portugal's former Europe minister and now a senior fellow at Renmin University in China, is one of our chaotic times' most fertile brains.

*Belt and Road* is essentially an extended essay on what happens next if China constructs a new world order. Although it lacks some of the journalistic élan of his Eurasia book, there is nothing dry about it. He unearths, for example, a Belt and Road matchmaking service that introduces Ukrainian women to Chinese men. He marvels at how Chinese funding is creating great feats of engineering, including the expansion of the Karakoram highway linking Xinjiang in western China to central Pakistan. Across Asia things are on the move, in large part because of Chinese ambition, and Maçães is right to be excited about it.

The problems about the Belt and Road project arise when one looks at implementation and intention. Is China using the scheme to mask a military rise that will translate into a direct challenge to the US? And where does that lead? To the Thucydides Trap, perhaps, whereby rising powers and the established hegemon struggle to avoid war?

America is not the only power to be discomfited by China's challenge to the status quo. Maçães tells the story of an Indian spy, codenamed Monkey, who allegedly slipped into Pakistan to fund separatists in Balochistan and thus thwart the deepening relationship between Pakistan and China. China is building up the Pakistani port of Gwadar, and this would have been targeted if the Indian plot had gone ahead. Why should India be worried? Well, says Maçães, "not only will China's military power appear simultaneously in its east, west and north directions, but also Pakistan will be able to completely cut off India from Iran".

China is trying to reduce its vulnerability by investing heavily in the defence of the sea lanes it needs to deliver its raw materials and fuel. That applies not only to warm-water ports, but increasingly to the Arctic. When the ice caps melt it will be able to dispatch far more quickly its products to Europe along the northern route. So far it seems to accept that it cannot do this unilaterally, but must negotiate terms with Russia and others on the Arctic littoral.

China's investment is based on loans that have to be repaid. Often it will accept an equity stake in lieu of cash. The result: deep suspicion in countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka that they are being persuaded to buy into infrastructure projects that ultimately eat into their sovereignty. The work is often done by Chinese labour, so there are few employment advantages; Chinese management can be overbearing. The Belt and Road could lead to quite substantial blowback from countries that sniff the return of colonial mastery in a different form.

Where does this lead? Maçães imagines China in 2049, a century on from the founding of the communist state. Will there be bunting? Will there even be a Communist Party left to organise the festivities? The author sees four possible outcomes. In the first, China gradually integrates into the liberal world order and its economy reaches parity with the US. Together they effectively rule the world economy, but militarily and politically China does not challenge the US leadership role.

The second scenario is that China replaces the US at the centre of global power, but the fundamentals — the multilateral institutions and open trade — remain the same. A third more brutal outcome: China not only takes over from the US, but Chinese values supplant those of the West and Beijing sets the rules. The final scenario is perhaps the most likely. It sees a forced coexistence between China and the US, a balance between the two in which competition, integration and conflict operate simultaneously. That replicates in some ways the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union.

None of this soothes the nerves. How will this breakneck race for power end? Maçães says: "It will be a world of saints, soothsayers and spooks." He doesn't mention soldiers. Perhaps he should have done. Despite Maçães's more benign scenarios, it is difficult to imagine how China and the US can reorder their relationship without some form of military confrontation. That should worry us all.

**Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order** by Bruno Maçães, Hurst, 288pp, £20