

Chapter 25

The Belt and Road Initiative and Autocracy Promotion as Elements of China's Grand Strategy



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25.1 Introduction

The economic and military rise of China in the twenty-first century, along with the ascension of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, has led the country to re-evaluate its grand strategy in the international arena. A grand strategy can be broadly defined as a “state’s theory of how it can achieve its strategic objectives that is intentional, coordinated, and implemented across multiple means of statecraft—military, economic, and political” (Doshi, 2021, p. 6). In China’s case, the grand strategy adopted under Xi Jinping aims to challenge the American leadership over the global order, known as the liberal international order (LIO) (Doshi, 2021; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Liu, 2015).

To realise its grand strategy, China needs to achieve hegemony at the regional and global levels (Doshi, 2021). To achieve hegemony at the regional level, China would ultimately have to drive the United States (US) Navy out of the Western Pacific and resolve maritime disputes with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas while gaining recognition as the leading nation by the countries at its periphery. At the global level, in response to the US’s refusal to acknowledge its status as a dwindling superpower, Beijing would need to undermine the norms and institutions that underpin the LIO and use coercive measures, incentives, and instruments of legitimacy to consolidate an alternative Sinocentric order (Doshi, 2021).

This chapter analyses the role of autocracy promotion in China’s grand strategy and the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this context. We argue that both

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the BRI and autocracy promotion can be considered tools Beijing uses to undermine the LIO. The BRI has a dual role in realising China's grand strategy: first, it expands Beijing's power projection; and second, it helps promote autocracy. Autocracy promotion refers to "political actors' attempts to consciously support autocratic regimes from the outside or to slow down processes of democratisation in transformation countries" (Kästner, 2019, p. 411). China does not engage in obvious activities to export its political system, but rather in what could be called *de facto* autocracy promotion. Its efforts are aimed at preventing the spread of Western democracy in its immediate vicinity, guaranteeing CCP rule, and ultimately damaging the liberal values at the heart of the current international order (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Diamond, 2019; Doshi, 2021; Rolland, 2020).

The first section of the chapter situates Beijing's autocracy promotion efforts in China's grand strategy. In the second section, we outline different strategies China uses to promote autocracy abroad and investigate how autocracy promotion in various regions of the world serves Beijing's core strategic objectives. The third section assesses how Beijing utilises the BRI to promote autocracy abroad, targeting autocracies and democracies alike. The conclusion provides a final assessment of the relationship between the BRI, autocracy promotion, and China's grand strategy.

25.2 Locating Autocracy Promotion in China's Grand Strategy

China's grand strategy has been a matter of debate among Western and Chinese scholars. According to Swaine (2000), China aims to achieve three interconnected goals: first, the maintenance of domestic stability and prosperity even in the context of social unrest; second, the protection of national sovereignty and its territory against external threats; and third, the achievement and preservation of its geopolitical clout as a great power, and perhaps a hegemon, in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere. To support these objectives, China has pursued market-led economic growth, cultivated positive relations with all states—particularly the major powers—, exercised restraint in using force, and expanded its involvement in regional and global affairs (Li & Poh, 2019).

Goldstein (2020) points out three main transformations of China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: first, Xi has made an effort to reassure the international community of the benevolent intentions of a more powerful China; second, he has adopted a more confident stance in pushing for reforms of the existing international order, while embracing the elements that have supported China's rise, such as economic openness; and third, unlike his predecessors, Xi has been more prone to resisting challenges to what the CCP defines as the country's core interests. These core interests include physical security and safeguarding the one-party state under the CCP's leadership (Khan, 2018).

Among Chinese scholars, Liu and Hao (2014) argue that China's long-term strategic goals include developing a wealthy, robust modern nation that can compete with the developed world. Zhang (2016) contends that, while economic growth is important, China's neighbourhood ties should be the primary focus of its grand strategic thinking. Alongside regional economic cooperation, building military capabilities is therefore crucial for China to control the situation in the region, ward off the influence of other countries such as the United States, and prevent the outbreak of war in its neighbourhood (Zhang, 2016). In turn, Yan (2018) suggests that, in the face of a fading US liberal hegemony, China should combine Chinese traditional values (such as benevolence, righteousness, and observance of rites) with selected liberalist values (such as equality, democracy, and freedom) to produce a new set of principles of "humane authority," such as fairness, justice, and civility, that should prove universally acceptable to people of different countries and could shape the future international normative order (Yan, 2018). In general, Chinese analysts tend to agree that Chinese foreign policy is designed to help maintain national security and regime stability, secure access to commodities for domestic economic development, and boost the nation's international influence (Li & Poh, 2019). The different conceptions of Chinese grand strategy can be largely summarised into two main goals: securing the CCP's unchallenged rule in the short term and outcompeting the US-led liberal international order in the long term.

In the CCP's view, China is still in the dynastic cycle that existed in Imperial China, where the struggle for political power is a zero-sum game in which winners take all and losers face extinction (Prestowitz, 2021). Therefore, maintaining "ideological security" and defending the country against "negative cultural infiltration" are paramount goals for the Party (Brady, 2017). This notion can be found in the *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere*, known as "Document 9," which was distributed to all high-level Party organisations in April 2013 (ChinaFile, 2013; Prestowitz, 2021). The document orders cadres to wage "intense struggle" against "false ideological trends, positions and activities," such as the promotion of Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, Western ideas of journalism, and the questioning of socialism with Chinese characteristics (ChinaFile, 2013). Similar views are expressed in a white paper titled "China: Democracy That Works" (PRC, 2021a) and a report on the state of democracy in the United States (PRC, 2021b) released in December 2021. Both documents question Western criteria for democracy and (using the example of the United States) Western interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of promoting democracy.

These documents reflect the CCP's belief that the liberal values of the West threaten it. They also explain why China, despite its claims that it does not aspire to export its political regime, is pursuing de facto strategies to promote autocracy, since helping leaders abandon democratic practices and helping authoritarian strongmen stay in power makes the world a safer place for autocracies like itself. Beijing's rationale is to shield itself from Western democracy promotion by counteracting it. Therefore, in the short run, autocracy promotion is primarily a defence strategy

to guarantee the survival of the Communist regime (Bader, 2015; Diamond, 2019; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

In the long run, however, Beijing contends its authoritarian capitalist model can outcompete the US-led LIO. As China rises, Chinese politicians and intellectuals have become more outspoken about ideas such as the fight for Chinese dominance on the Asian continent, international recognition of the country's status as a great power, and the construction of a China-centred global order that would enhance the current international system (Jiang, 2018; Liu, 2015; Xi, 2017). These ideas are derived from the ancient concept of *Tianxia* (天下). Translated as “all-under-heaven,” this concept defines an ordered system with Imperial China at the centre of a world organised into concentric circles. According to this historical conception, the emperor and the Han people were located at the core, with the first circle inhabited by peoples of different ethnicities living under the occupation of Chinese peasant-soldiers. The second circle was populated by vassals who paid tributes as a gesture of submission. Finally, the last circle was composed of “barbarians” and considered to be a hotbed of tension and strife (Struye de Swielande & Orinx, 2021).

25.3 Varieties of Autocracy Promotion by China

We use the term “autocracy promotion” broadly and as an analytical term to denote strategies that help make the “world safe for dictatorship” (see Dukalskis, 2021). Autocracy promotion includes not only measures to support and strengthen existing authoritarian regimes, to slow down democratisation processes, or undermine democracies (Kästner, 2019), but also efforts directed at foreign audiences to legitimise an autocratic political system, which Dukalskis (2021, p. 135) describes as “authoritarian image management.” China views itself as a democracy with “distinctive Chinese characteristics” or as “a people's democratic dictatorship” (PRC, 2021a). Thus, while China does not openly state its intention to promote autocracy, it is in fact pursuing a number of strategies that strengthen other autocracies and undermine Western democracies.

To strengthen autocracies and help dictators stay in power, the country uses five main strategies. First, China provides a model for authoritarian governments that seek economic development while maintaining unchallenged rule (Nathan, 2016). The so-called China Model is largely understood as “China's approach to the establishment of free-market capitalism under the umbrella of an authoritarian one-party state that emphasises political stability above all else” (Bell, 2015, p. 179). In this regard, Beijing and several of its African partners, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zambia, have implemented Chinese-led special economic zones to foster manufacturing and exports. It is noteworthy that many of these fellow regimes are authoritarian (Economy, 2019).

Second, China is using international media platforms to disseminate its propaganda (Nathan, 2016). Using conventional and social media, alongside public and cultural diplomacy, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department enhances China's

foreign image by manipulating foreign audiences' perceptions of it. The free content from China's *Xinhua News Agency* has become a key source of news material in places like Africa, where local media are underfunded. Obviously, none of the content is anti-China (Nathan, 2016).

Third, China is creating and disseminating censorship and repression techniques (Nathan, 2016). For instance, Chinese firms have delivered modern mass surveillance devices to South American nations like Bolivia and Ecuador during periods of major democratic regression. In 2018, the Chinese company ZTE provided the technology for Venezuela's "Fatherland Card," an ID card with a QR code that allows the autocratic government of President Nicolás Maduro (since 2013) to keep personal information of citizens and track their communication and activities (Ellis, 2019).

Fourth, China is collaborating with autocratic or competitive authoritarian countries that serve as major economic and geopolitical allies. China has won favourable economic access and political-diplomatic support from Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and Southeast and South Asian states such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Nepal, in extraditing Uyghurs, Tibetans, and democracy campaigners, as well as in isolating Taiwan. These regimes gain from China's assistance in the form of capital, markets, armaments, diplomatic support, and other advantages (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Nathan, 2016; Wong, 2021).

Fifth, China and other authoritarian powers are working together to alter international standards to prevent international monitoring of their repressive actions (Nathan, 2016; Wong, 2021). In international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), China has collaborated with like-minded governments, particularly Russia and Saudi Arabia, to promote the Universal Periodic Review process, reducing the degree to which specific countries are scrutinised (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Nathan, 2016). China also backed a UNHRC initiative requiring every state to submit a Human Rights Action Plan, which would enable each member state to express their own understanding of how international human rights norms should be interpreted and applied (Nathan, 2016).

China's strategies for undermining democracies consist mainly of political influence activities, which can be grouped into three categories. First, democracies, like autocracies, are besieged by a worldwide multi-platform strategic communication strategy (Brady, 2017; Dukalskis, 2021; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). Cultural and public diplomacy, strategic mergers and acquisitions of China's party-state media corporations with international media and cultural businesses, and the "harmonisation" of overseas Chinese media with Chinese mainland media are all part of this strategy (Brady, 2017). For example, after an agreement with the *Shanghai Media Group*, a company backed by Beijing, the Australian state-supported *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC) made the unprecedented concession to delete news and current affairs information from its Chinese language programming in 2014 (Brady, 2017).

Second, China attempts to influence and exploit the overseas Chinese populations in democratic countries in order to advance its foreign policy agenda (Brady, 2017). This strategy includes tools like claiming extraterritorial legal authority, using

Chinese ethnic organisations to watch local Chinese communities, and luring key diasporic Chinese personalities to mould the opinion of their compatriots abroad on political matters (Brady, 2017; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Rotella, 2021). For example, the *Peaceful Reunification of China Association of New Zealand* (PRCANZ) promotes Beijing's foreign policy objectives via various initiatives, including campaigning for and seeking financial support for overseas Chinese political candidates who agree to accept the organisation's mission (Brady, 2017).

Third, China aims to co-opt foreigners to achieve its foreign policy objectives. To do this, Beijing mobilises human-to-human, party-to-party, and Chinese company-to-foreign company relations (Brady, 2017). For instance, China nominates foreigners with access to political power to high-level posts in Chinese enterprises or Chinese state-sponsored organisations in the host country and uses city partnerships to push its economic agenda independent of the target nation's foreign policy (Brady, 2017; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). For example, in exchange for the Czech Republic's complete reorientation of policy towards Beijing, the populist President Miloš Zeman (since 2013) secured a prized licence for Czech business in China, becoming a vocal supporter of the CCP (Diamond, 2019).

China's autocracy promotion strategies serve both of its two core strategic objectives: the short-term goal of stabilising CCP rule and the long-term goal of undermining the LIO through supporting autocracies and undermining democracies, as Beijing increasingly aspires to challenge Washington's global leadership in the economic, political, and, eventually, military spheres. For the Chinese government, opposing US efforts to promote democracy is part and parcel of contesting Washington's influence in the international arena (Diamond, 2019; Hsu et al., 2020; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

In its immediate vicinity, China's autocracy promotion is closely related to the CCP's regime survival, as it protects the country from potentially contagious democratisation processes in neighbouring states and bolsters Beijing's influence in the region while diluting Washington's clout (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Diamond, 2019). Moreover, the presence of other autocratic countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with whom China can negotiate simplifies Chinese diplomacy; this is in complete contrast to its dealings with democracies, where a plurality of actors need to be considered, including critics of China whose objections are protected by freedom of speech (Bader, 2015; Emmerson, 2021).

In turn, autocracy promotion in faraway places such as Latin America, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe is linked to Beijing's quest to undermine the US-led LIO and to challenge US hegemony in those places. China's *modus operandi* in such regions is "filling the void," that is, imprinting a geopolitical footprint, mainly through trade and investments, in countries largely taken for granted by Western powers due to their fragile economies and low credit ratings (Jacoby, 2014; Jenkins, 2019; Urdinez et al., 2016). China is now the leading source of imports for about 35 countries and the top destination of exports for around 25 countries (Wong, 2021). This is a favourable situation for Beijing's autocracy promotion, as its strategies for

strengthening autocracies and undermining democracies are more impactful in countries with extensive Chinese economic, political, and military presence (Diamond, 2019; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020; Hsu et al., 2020; Nathan, 2016).

25.4 The Belt and Road Initiative and Autocracy Promotion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), inaugurated by Xi Jinping in October 2013, is a gigantic project which includes the financing and building of a network of roads, railroads, oil and natural gas pipelines, fibre-optic and communication systems, harbours, and airports. The BRI aims to assemble and enhance a dense network of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) into a multilateral structure rooted in China's gravitational pull and enormous open market. Crossing Russia and Central Asia, the "belt" connects China to Europe. It also heads to the Middle East via Central Asia and has ramifications in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the "road" aspires to link China and Europe across the South China Sea (Zhang et al., 2018). As of January 2021, 140 countries had joined the initiative (Green Belt & Road Initiative Center, 2021).

As highlighted in the introduction to this special section (see chapter 16 of this volume), the BRI is primarily an economic and geostrategic project. Yet, political-ideological motives are closely interlinked with economic and geostrategic ones in the Chinese grand strategy. The BRI, therefore, has a dual role in the realisation of China's grand strategy: first, to expand Beijing's power projection through the establishment of various forms of control to influence the behaviour of other states, fostering the building of a future Sinocentric order (Doshi, 2021; Reeves, 2018; Rolland, 2020; Smith, 2021); and second, to uphold and spread its authoritarian model (Doshi, 2021; Lee, 2018; Rolland, 2020; Yu, 2019).

Xi Jinping's China utilises the BRI to pave the way for a Sinocentric international order. In line with the concept of *Tianxia*, this new Sinocentric order would first establish a "zone of super-ordinate influence in Asia" and "partial hegemony in swaths of the developing world" (Doshi, 2021, p. 4), which might subsequently expand to Western industrialised countries. This approach has been compared to Mao Zedong's revolutionary guidance to "surround the cities from the countryside" (Doshi, 2021, p. 4).

The spread of autocracy is mainly based on the degree of linkage and leverage among states (Hasenkamp, 2021; Levitsky & Way, 2010). These concepts were originally coined for analysing the influence of external actors on democratisation. Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 43) defined linkage as "the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information)" among particular non-Western countries on the one hand, and Western democracies and Western-led multilateral institutions on the other. In turn, leverage "refers not to the exercise of external pressure, per se, but instead to a country's vulnerability to such pressure" (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 41; also see Hasenkamp, 2021).

The BRI works as an efficient tool for creating linkage between China and other countries (Lu et al., 2021). The prevalence of illiberalism in Eurasia offers the ideal setting for China's distinctive political-economic model to expand and its geopolitical endeavour to flourish (Yu, 2019). The BRI facilitates Chinese investments towards countries with poor rule of law and government accountability, which are often ruled by autocrats. The boosting of such regimes happens at the expense of the political rights of the citizens in the BRI countries (Sutherland et al., 2020). As far as leverage is concerned, Beijing has amassed a significant level of influence in several BRI countries. Countries with high levels of corruption and large ethnic Chinese populations (such as Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Singapore) seem to be more vulnerable to Chinese influence (Mazarr et al., 2021).

The BRI has amplified these two variables. Regarding corruption, Ping et al. (2022) have found that China's resource-related projects are damaging recipient nations' institutional capacity to impose constraints on executive power. To ensure the swift delivery of projects, governments in partner nations may try to undermine horizontal accountability. Once horizontal control institutions are weakened, corrupt government officials are less likely to be identified and penalised (Ping et al., 2022).

Concerning Chinese communities abroad, BRI projects promote the movement of workers, managers, and technicians and all types of "camp-followers" (from accountants to tour guides) to attend to their professional and personal needs (Nyiri, 2021). In the regions along the BRI, already in 2015, the stock of migrants from China had increased substantially compared to the early 1990s. The most significant percentage increases could be observed in West Asia (524%), Eastern Africa (297%), and Southern Africa (126%) (Muttarak, 2017). While the increase of corruption along the BRI and Chinese outward migration to the participating countries are not engineered by China, they are externalities produced by the BRI that benefit Beijing's autocracy promotion abroad.

When it comes to promoting autocracy, the BRI cuts across the strategies presented in the previous section of this chapter in that it targets both autocracies and democracies. The BRI is one of several tools used by China to make the world safe for autocracy by taking advantage of the linkage and leverage with the BRI countries enabled by the Initiative. Table 25.1 maps how China's BRI activities feed into several of its autocracy promotion strategies.

In addition, most countries which have joined the BRI are ruled by nondemocratic regimes (Schaffar, 2021), and the Initiative motivates China to support existing autocracies as it needs a stable political environment to protect its investments, assets, and citizens abroad and to implement its projects effectively. During the first meeting of the CCP Central National Security Commission (CNSC) in April 2014, Xi Jinping outlined the concept of Holistic National Security, which entails "the security of the people as a compass, political security at its roots, economic security as its pillar, military security, cultural security, and social security as its protections, and that relies on the promotion of international security" (quoted in Ghiselli, 2021, p. 36). Thus, the well-being and property of Chinese nationals and businesses overseas are

Table 25.1 The BRI and China's autocracy promotion strategies

Autocracy promotion strategies	Corresponding BRI activities
Wielding the power of its example	a) Offering China-based "China Model" training programmes and exchanges to foreign government officials, journalists, and students
Disseminating propaganda and strategic communication	b) Boosting Beijing's soft power and capacity to shape international norms by financing both domestic and foreign BRI think tanks c) Using the BRI as a unifying theme to seek cooperation with overseas media outlets that will absorb and deliver Chinese propaganda through their local media platforms d) Exploiting Chinese and foreign print, broadcast, and digital media to spread the official BRI narrative of "win-win relations" worldwide
Providing economic support	e) Transferring development assistance and non-concessional loans to bolster autocratic governments f) Granting loans to authoritarian regimes in BRI countries via China's financial sector and China-led financial institutions
Influencing overseas Chinese communities	g) Drawing on the resources and assistance of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs to extend the objectives of the BRI
Co-opting foreigners	h) Getting foreign governments to promote China's BRI to their citizens and neighbouring states i) Working closely on BRI projects with both national and local government leaders (who may allow the infiltration of Chinese influence bypassing national executives) j) Taking advantage of business communities as lobby groups to gain access to high-ranking government officials and persuade them to favour policies towards the BRI

Source Authors' elaboration (based on Hsu et al., 2020; Lee, 2018; Nathan, 2016; Poon, 2018; Rolland, 2019)

among the most important referent objects in Beijing's security policy (Ghiselli, 2021).

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that China uses the BRI to strengthen autocracies but refrains from fostering regime change in democracies since that could lead to political instability and endanger the Chinese investments there. However, Schaffar (2021) observes that in some BRI countries, evolving autocratisation processes were reinforced by the Chinese financial flows fostered by the Initiative. Hungary and Thailand are two paradigmatic cases in which seemingly consolidated democracies lapsed into autocratic forms of rule. Autocratisation processes started in Hungary in 2010 under the government of far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and in Thailand

with the military coup d'état in 2014, which installed General Prayuth Chan-o-cha as Prime Minister. The Southeast Asian nation joined the BRI in 2014, and the Central European country did the same in 2015 (Nedopil, 2022). In both cases, BRI-related economic flows intensified political conflict and increased intra-elite competition. The outward-oriented economic projects of the former Hungarian and Thai elites were derailed by an economic crisis and the rise of a new inward-oriented elite. These new actors have backed developmentalist approaches and instrumentalised Beijing's investments to secure their dominance. Even though neither regime was installed by Beijing, the Chinese capital indirectly facilitated regime change in these countries (Schaffar, 2021).

It should also be noted that Beijing exports elements of the "China Model" to democracies, particularly to Central, Eastern, and Southeast European countries, via the BRI. In this process, liberal ideas give way to a more state-controlled perspective, with European countries—intentionally or not—increasingly resembling China (Vangeli, 2021).

25.5 Conclusion

China's rise in the twenty-first century has seen the country gain confidence and assertiveness abroad. While Beijing's grand strategy is to secure CCP rule in the short term, the long-term goal is to surpass the US-led LIO. Under Xi Jinping, China uses the BRI as a tool to create a Sinocentric economic order in Asia, which will be an important cornerstone of its future leadership in a non-liberal world order.

The BRI makes a twofold contribution. As an economic and geostrategic project, it contributes to China's grand strategy by expanding Beijing's power projection. However, its political ambitions should not be underestimated. Since economic, geostrategic, and political-ideological motives are closely linked in the Chinese grand strategy, the second contribution of the BRI consists of promoting autocracy via the development of linkage and leverage between China and the BRI countries. As illustrated by Table 25.1, the BRI's role is to facilitate many of China's strategies for the promotion of autocracy abroad.

The BRI is an attempt to build a "community of common destiny," an idea derived from the concept of *Tianxia* (Smith, 2021). Both of the two BRI contributions—power projection as well as autocracy promotion—seem to work following a logic of concentric circles, in which China prioritises the states in its vicinity over states further away. Large portions of BRI investment since 2013 have gone to Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. China's economic and diplomatic relations and autocracy promotion strategies towards neighbouring states strengthen the authoritarian regimes of those states. The purpose is to cement the CCP's rule at home and to guarantee a stable political environment for its citizens and projects abroad. At the same time, China uses these strategies to protect itself against and counteract Western democracy promotion, both in its vicinity and on the global stage.

The BRI contributes to the expansion of Chinese influence in Asia, in the course of which the region is permeated by non-liberal values and tends to prioritise national sovereignty over individual liberty, market authoritarianism over market liberalism, political authoritarianism over democracy, and civil obedience over civil liberty (Yu, 2019). If this endeavour progresses, China will establish itself as a normative power in the region and be well-positioned to ultimately spread non-liberal ideas around the globe and to shape a future international order with itself at its centre.

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