

The Rise of Connectivity Politics and China's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Globalization and digitization have greatly increased the connectivity of the world. The power of connectivity is increasingly becoming a determining force in international affairs, thus, ushering in an era of "connectivity politics." Connectivity is characterized by its organic nature, multidimensionality, and dual effects. Only those nations that understand these characteristics and are adept at maximizing the positive effects of connectivity while avoiding the negative ones can succeed in international competition. While the term "connectivity politics" was not mentioned in China's foreign policy documents, the connectivity thinking is an integral part of China's fundamental philosophy and ideology. Therefore, China's foreign policy naturally reflects its emphasis on connectivity. Some Western scholars studied the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a case of connectivity politics. However, it is important to recognize that the BRI is just one example of the rising power of global connectivity. We need to examine the whole picture of connectivity politics to understand the new trends of international relations.

Keywords: Connectivity Politics, International Relations, China, Foreign Policy, BRI

1. Introduction

In the past several years, the word of "connectivity politics" has been used by some Western scholars in their studies on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is true that BRI focused on enhancing connectivity through infrastructure development, trade, and investment while promoting economic integration, regional cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges among participating countries. However, looking back the past three decades since 1990s, we could see that BRI is just part of the whole process of connectivity's significant increase worldwide, which was powered by the globalization and digitalization.

Thus, when we discussing "connectivity politics," we'd better examine the entire process in the past 30 years. How did connectivity politics rise? How important it is now? How will it impact today's and future international relations? These questions will be discussed in the following chapters.

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As BRI is a significant event in the process of the rising of connectivity politics, we cannot avoid studying and discussing it. It is also an important component of China's foreign policy. However, a surprising fact for Western scholars is that the term of connectivity politics has not appeared in China's foreign policy documents or speeches by Chinese leaders. This indicates that China does not consider connectivity politics as a policy tool.

If we carefully examine Chinese philosophy and culture, we will find that the logic of connectivity politics has been ingrained in the Chinese way of thinking since ancient times. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese foreign policy has never lacked connectivity thinking. Therefore, China's foreign policy naturally adapts to the requirements of the connectivity politics era. Or, it can be argued that China's deep-rooted cultural and philosophical traditions, which emphasize connectivity, have influenced its foreign policy, leading it to naturally embrace the connectivity politics.

2. The New Era of Connectivity Politics

We have been living in a world dominated by power politics. The quest for power among nations can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where empires and kingdoms sought to expand their territories, control resources, and establish dominance over others. The 20th century witnessed the height of power politics, particularly during the two World Wars and the Cold War. These conflicts were characterized by intense rivalries, military alliances, arms races, and ideological confrontations between major powers. The bipolar power structure of the Cold War, with the United States and the Soviet Union as the superpowers, exemplified the dynamics of power politics during that era.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, though power politics continues to shape global affairs, it is in a more complex and interconnected world. The rise of emerging powers, economic interdependence, digitalization of information, and the evolving nature of global challenges have added new dimensions to power dynamics among nations.

A notable trend is the increasing role of connectivity in international affairs. Let us compare the different ways the United States treated the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the Kim Jong-un regime in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). We can find out that connectivity, rather than power, has become the determining factor.

The United States did not find weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq after occupying the country, but it overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime and executed him. On the contrary, despite Kim Jong-un's high-profile announcement of the nuclear

weapons program completion, the United States did not resort to military action. Former President Donald Trump even met with Kim twice. The severely deteriorated relationship between the Saddam Hussein regime and the United States' key ally Israel, and the relationships of DPRK with South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia, have played crucial roles in shaping these dynamics. South Korea, a vital ally of the United States in Asia, is most reluctant to see any conflict erupt on the Korean Peninsula, as it is within the range of DPRK's artillery.

On the one hand, the role of connectivity in international affairs is increasing, while on the other hand, it also brings new challenges to countries' foreign policies. The failures of the U.S. decoupling from China and the limited effects of sanctions against Russia highlight the importance and complexity of connectivity in today's international affairs.

Joseph Nye, Jr., who observed and analyzed interdependence in international relations for several decades, wrote in an article in 2001, "Is there anything about globalism today that is fundamentally different? Every era builds on others. Historians can always find precursors in the past for phenomena of the present, but contemporary globalization goes 'faster, cheaper and deeper.' The degree of thickening of globalism is giving rise to increased density of networks, increased 'institutional velocity,' and increased transnational participation" (Nye, 2001).

Before nuclear power was developed, the world was dominated by "might was right," and military force determined everything. Even after peace treaties were signed to prohibit the initiation of military attacks, countries could still break these agreements if they had sufficient military strength to conquer their opponents.

But after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear deterrence became the fundamental reason for maintaining overall peace in the world for nearly 80 years. This demonstrates that nuclear power as a kind of "ultimate weapon" has changed the game rule. World politics is no longer determined by military force alone but by the comprehensive competition of strengths. The "military might politics era" ended, and a "comprehensive strength politics era" started.

In the era of "comprehensive strength politics," the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was the most significant international event. The two countries engaged in an arms race, space race, and ideological competition, attempting to attract as many nations as possible to their respective camps. In that period, economic prosperity, military strength, technological superiority, and cultural influence were all manifestations of great power. Ultimately, the United States emerged victorious in competing strengths on multiple fronts. It is pretty likely that the Soviet Union failed to recognize that the world had transitioned from an era of "military might politics" to an era of "comprehensive strength politics" and placed excessive emphasis on military competition while lacking an understanding of the significance of economic and technological competition.

History teaches us that it is crucial to recognize the game-changing forces to adapt to the new trends of the times and find the right path forward. As connectivity becomes a more and more determining factor in reshaping the landscape of international relations, we need to adapt our policy to an emerging “connectivity politics era.”

3. The Three Characteristics of Connectivity

“The practice of connectivity itself is as old as human interactions. What is novel is the emergence of connectivity as a strategy with geopolitical implications” (Godehardt, 2020). If we are indeed in a “connectivity politics era,” we have to know how to deal with this new “strategy.” There are at least three characteristics of connectivity that need to pay attention to.

The first is its organicity. Connectivity is organic. It is alive and can grow. This explains why the sanctions against Russia seem not satisfying to the U.S. and some European countries and why China was not hurt much after the U.S. added extra tariffs on imported Chinese products. When Russia's oil and natural gas exports to Europe dropped, India's imports from Russia surged, with lower prices. When the U.S. export of soybeans to China fell, Brazil's soybean exports to China surged. The connectivity network is not lifeless and fixed. It always grows and changes.

Indeed, let us examine the situations in Cuba, Myanmar, Venezuela, DPRK, Syria, and Iran. It becomes clear that long-term, large-scale sanctions, aiming to cut these countries' connections with the outside world, still need to achieve the desired outcomes envisioned by the U.S., which often included overturning the regimes or forcing them to change their policies. This is due to the organic growth of connectivity, nourished by vitally essential activities, which makes eliminating connectivity almost impossible.

The second is its multidimensionality. We can perhaps categorize all connections into four "networks" – the network of personnel mobility, the network of material flow, the network of capital flow, and the network of information flow. Let us consider each network as representing a dimension of connectivity politics. The intersecting combinations of these four networks make it difficult for us to depict the complete picture on any single piece of paper, as it goes beyond the scope of three dimensions. As described by Keohane and Nye in "Power and Interdependence," this complex interdependence is challenging to calculate and measure (Keohane, 2012). They bring about unimaginable infinite transformations to international relations.

The third is its dual effects. Is having more connections with the outside world always beneficial for a country? It depends. Connectivity has both positive and negative effects. Positive effects can benefit a country, while adverse effects can be harmful. For example, a border connects two countries. Cross-border trade can help the people of both

countries, but there are often problems, even disputes, of smuggling, illegal immigration, and cross-border transmission of diseases, etc.

In an era of connectivity politics, only those countries that understand how to maximize the positive effects of connectivity and avoid its adverse effects will win in competition between nations. Conversely, a country that needs to realize the importance of connectivity and understand its characteristics will retain it.

4. Connectivity politics and BRI

The reasons that BRI has become a prominent case for studying connectivity politics among some Western scholars may include the following.

Firstly, the BRI involves a vast network of infrastructure projects, trade routes, and economic partnerships across multiple countries and regions. The scales of investments and the number of countries involved are big enough to attract the attention of scholars. This complex web of connections provides researchers with a rich dataset to analyze the political dynamics, power relations, and interdependencies between participating nations.

Secondly, China is the second largest economy. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken describes it as “the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” Studying a global initiative proposed by China gains momentum.

Thirdly, as more than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations have signed BRI cooperation documents, more issues related to the potential impact on world development and global governance need to be discussed, such as norms, rules, and standards in areas like trade, investment, and environmental protection. Scholars have been drawn to examine how the BRI may shape the world's political and economic landscape and influence the balance of power in international relations and people's interaction through its extensive network of connections.

Some scholars trace it to the root and try to foresee its future by studying China's foreign policy. Some of them argued that China intends to build worldwide connectivity through BRI as a strategy to reshape the world order. However, to their surprise, connectivity politics was not mentioned in China's foreign policy documents or Chinese leaders' foreign policy speeches. From this, we can conclude that it is not a foreign policy tool for China.

However, it does not imply that it is unrelated to China's foreign policy. The reasons that connectivity politics was not mentioned in China's foreign policy declarations but still holds significant relevance may include the following two reasons.

Firstly, connectivity thinking is built into Chinese philosophy, so it is naturally reflected in China's foreign policy. The two pillars of contemporary Chinese philosophy are traditional philosophy and Marxism philosophy. Both emphasize connections in the world. Marxist dialectical materialism holds that everything in the world is interconnected. In China's traditional philosophy, “天人合一” (unity of heaven, earth, and humanity), “相生相克” (mutual generation and restraint between different elements or forces in the natural world), and many other concepts express the connectivity thinking. These concepts all embody a holistic perspective in traditional Chinese philosophy, suggesting that everything in the world is interconnected and interdependent, with no isolated existence.

With holistic philosophy, Chinese foreign policy is soaked in connectivity thinking, with no necessity to speak out, just as people don't need to be constantly reminded of the existence of oxygen.

However, there are often expressions of “connections” and “interdependence” in China's government documents and officials' statements. For example, in Xi Jinping's report to the 20th National Congress of CPC on Oct. 22, 2022, he said, “We must apply systems thinking. All things are interconnected and interdependent. We must view them with the understanding that they are universally connected, part of a complete system, and constantly evolving if we are to grasp the laws governing their development” (Xi, 2022).

Chinese ideology is more “collectivist” (集体主义), while the Western is more individualistic. The “things are universally connected” is a cornerstone of China's collectivism.

Secondly, China has been trying hard to build connections with the outside world long before the BRI and connectivity politics were discussed. Though the ancient Silk Road helped Chinese people to establish vast connections with the outside world, what happened after Deng Xiaoping initiated the Opening-up policy in the 1980s must be addressed. After some 40 years of Reform and opening up, Chinese people are more and more convinced that stronger and broader connections with the world will benefit China. So, the Chinese government sticks to an opening-up policy and “open the door wider and wider.” Using the power of connectivity is not new in China's policymaking. With or without connectivity politics being discussed, China will continue its open-door policy, increasing global connectivity.

Understandably, many scholars have linked the BRI to connectivity politics. They are trying to provide insights into BRI's economic, geopolitical, and strategic implications for regional and global connectivity. If we are indeed in a new era of “connectivity politics,” BRI is undoubtedly a significant ongoing event that needs to be studied.

However, though the BRI is an outcome of China's connectivity thinking, it is only a

part of China's foreign policy. The Global Community with Shared Future, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative, etc., are all important Chinese foreign policies. The assertion that China leverages BRI to reshape international order ignores the importance of considering China's foreign policy as a whole.

The ancient Silk Road was seen as "thin globalization" by Keohane and Nye, the two pioneer thinkers of interdependence (Keohane, 2000). As the density of world connectivity networks has dramatically increased, the current BRI is much "thicker." However, it is just one case to study the power of connectivity and only a part of the whole picture of connectivity politics today. We have reason to believe that research and discussions on these topics will continue and deepen.

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