

## **Exporting Autocracy via BRI? Experiences from Southeast Asia**

Yung-Ming Yen\*  
Tunghai University

### **Abstract**

While most agree that China's Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious strategy to maximise its geopolitical position worldwide, policymakers and scholars have questioned whether the BRI implies an attempt to promote Beijing's governance model. This article takes a political economy approach to analyse the domestic political dynamics of the recipient countries. Political elites tend to employ available incentives to consolidate their winning coalitions if their political survival is threatened. A regime under transition is vulnerable to external influence during political competition, and the "convenient" money from Beijing becomes an offer that the ruling elites of recipient states cannot decline. Consequently, such external influence indirectly undermines the regime dynamics of recipient states. The case studies of four Southeast Asian states — Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand — offer supportive evidence for this explanation.

**Keywords:** *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Southeast Asia, selectorate theory, autocracy export.*

---

\* Professor, Department of Political Science, Tunghai University, Taiwan; Email: [yyen76@gmail.com](mailto:yyen76@gmail.com).

## 1. Introduction

The 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping revealed the desire of the “Middle Empire” to restore the glory it lost over the last two centuries. By the end of 2018, the cumulative amount of investments undertaken within the framework of BRI was over \$650 billion. Although the initiative was popular in the developing world, its potential effects have raised concerns in policy and intellectual circles. Researchers are eager to determine BRI’s influence on economic, political, social, and strategic spheres. For example, does BRI bring recipient countries closer to Beijing’s stance on foreign policy matters? Some warn the possibility of a “debt trap” for recipient countries as they cannot change their dependence on China in the foreseeable future. Finally, could BRI change the political dynamics of the target state? (Hsueh, 2020)

In June 2020, the exiled opposition leader of Cambodia, Sam Rainsy, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled “China Has Designs on Democracy in Southeast Asia.” His main argument focuses on Beijing’s military expansion in Southeast Asia through BRI projects and the threat such an expansion poses to the U.S.’s strategic status in the region (Rainsy, 2020). However, Sam Rainsy’s analysis does not address the nexus between BRI and the democracy recession among regional states. The external factor of regime dynamics has been a critical issue for political scientists, and the last two decades have witnessed a change in research focus from democracy promotion to autocracy promotion. In contrast to the discussion of democracy promotion, how illiberal power influences the political development of target states has become the focal point in literature. As we approach the first decade of BRI, it is crucial to investigate the political consequences and assess the judgment that Beijing is exporting autocracy in BRI partner states.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section two discusses theoretical perspectives on autocracy promotion and export to evaluate their applicability in the Southeast Asian context. Section three briefly discusses BRI and its current status in Southeast Asia. In section four, case studies are conducted in four Southeast Asian states (Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand) to examine the linkage between BRI outputs and political dynamics. Finally, section five concludes the research findings and offers some theoretical reflection.

## **2. Theoretical Discussion**

Reilly argues that the degree of democracy across Southeast Asian countries varies based on geographical and historical conditions (Reilly, 2013). Generally, a country's geographic proximity to China is negatively related to its level of democracy; thus, maritime states are more likely to enjoy democratic rule than their mainland counterparts. On the other hand, the legacy of China's tributary system shapes the culture and institutional preferences of periphery countries, fortifying their non-democratic inclination. However, the relative weakness of Reilly's explanation lies in his failure to specify the causal mechanism (Levitsky and Way, 2006).

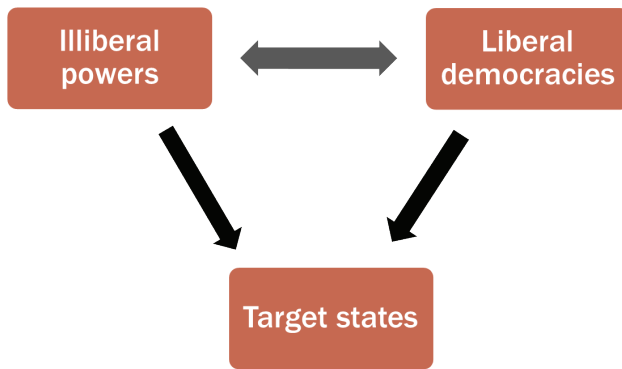
The influence of external factors has been a significant line of debate in the literature on democratisation. Unlike the previous two waves of democratic transitions, the "Third Wave" witnessed remarkable efforts by foreign states and international organisations to facilitate the change of governance patterns (Huntington, 1991). However, this argument does not hold up well in the Southeast Asian context. Had these external forces successfully wielded influence, the speed and scope of democratic transition in this region should have been more remarkable. Instead, international factors played a certain, but not decisive, role in political developments in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. For this reason, scholars of Southeast Asian politics tend to emphasise the relevance of the elite-level split in the transition process and other factors along with the development of democratic governance (Slater, 2008).

As the global trend of democratisation began to reverse in 2006, the shadow cast by authoritarian powers became increasingly salient. The 2008 global financial crisis was the tipping point where developing states questioned the institutional superiority of liberal democracy as a governance model. The fact that China survived the crisis and became the "saviour" of the global economy amplified the desirability of the "Beijing model". For developing countries, the original aspiration of freedom and development (as realised in the US and European societies) was overwhelmed by the "order and prosperity" illustrated by illiberal powers such as China.

The "democracy in retreat" trend suggests the need to scrutinise the framework of democratisation literature, one of which is the triangular framework introduced by Risse and Babayan consisting of Western democracy promoters, illiberal challengers, and the target states (Risse

and Babayan, 2015). Within this structure, two related but contradictory phenomena, namely democracy promotion and autocracy promotion, can be identified (see Figure 1). In contrast to its popularity in the 1990s, democracy promotion has gradually lost its magic in the last two decades, specifically when Washington shifted to unilateralism since the War on Terror. On the other hand, the increasing engagements between illiberal powers (especially Russia and China) and target countries exemplify autocracy promotion (Chen and Kinzelbach, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1. Democracy/Autocracy Export**



Conceptually, the interaction between illiberal powers and target states can be classified as authoritarian diffusion or autocracy promotion. While the former emphasizes cross-border learning and conscious emulation by the target states, the latter focuses on the role of illiberal powers. Ambrosio argues that authoritarian diffusion essentially entails an interactive process involving multiple actors, with two mechanisms, namely the logic of appropriateness and the logic of effectiveness, operating to engender the normative traction that brings about regime change (Ambrosio, 2010:382). Inspired by the constructivist paradigm, this explanation offers a convincing account of the ideational shift toward the illiberal governance model.

Similar to the discussion on democracy promotion, the literature on autocracy promotion assumes the apparent desire of powerful states to advance their preferred regime design in target societies. Accordingly, an illiberal power would adopt a policy to promote its regime type abroad. Nevertheless, the motive deserves closer examination as “promotion” suggests ideological commitment. For liberal powers, it is understandable

that their sincere belief in democratic values could drive a policy to promote democratic governance abroad. In the case of illiberal powers, however, the genuine belief in the desirability of authoritarian rule is a matter that requires scrutiny. Authoritarian leaders justify their takeover with exigency measures and commit to resuming democracy once the situation returns to normalcy. Thus, viewing illiberal powers as having a strong interest in their regime type, similar to democratic countries, could be problematic. Indeed, it has been argued that authoritarian powers may have the capabilities but lack the willingness to promote their regime type (Nathan, 2015). While insecurity could lead authoritarian powers to adopt countervailing measures against democracy promotion, establishing the “Beijing model” or “Moscow model” abroad may not necessarily ensue. Such a view is echoed by Tansey (2016), who questions the underlying motives of illiberal powers from three aspects: do external actors intend to shape domestic politics? Is the intention associated with a specific regime type or incumbent politicians? What is the nature of illiberal powers’ motivations? Tansey contends that what has been widely discussed as autocracy promotion in the literature is somewhat exaggerated. While qualified examples existed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, such a practice is no longer evident in the post-Cold War era (Tansey, 2016:153-5).

Thus, to study the external factors of authoritarian transition, it may not be sufficient to focus solely on the normative motivation of either the illiberal powers or the recipient states (Yakouchyk, 2019). Moreover, the framework shown in Figure 1 indicates the possibility that the efforts of autocracy promotion and democracy promotion could cancel each other out in the target country. The whole picture of democracy/autocracy promotion nowadays includes policy outputs from great powers and the nuances within the target country. Therefore, scholars began to posit the relevance of combining foreign policy analysis with the micro-foundation of domestic politics (Bader et al., 2010). Risse and Babayan argue that the causal mechanism between external forces and local consequences hinges on “the (dis-)empowerment of liberal as well as illiberal forces in the target countries” (Risse and Babayan, 2015:389). Thus, the domestic balance of power influences the probability of democracy promotion. Likewise, the impact of “autocracy export” is conditioned by the interplay of domestic interests in the target states, specifically, the calculation of political interest by the ruling elites.

Bueno de Mesquita and his colleagues shed further light on this from a political economy perspective (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Remaining in power (political survival) is the ultimate objective of all incumbent elites, but the way to realize this objective varies according to the regime's institutional configuration. In liberal democracies, political leaders depend on a large coalition of supporters to win a majority in the election, but dictators in autocracies usually "rely on a small coalition of cronies; then coalition members are readily satisfied by being made rich through corruption and cronyism" (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2012:121).

It is rational for authoritarian leaders to reward their coalition members at the expense of the public interest, given the small coalition size. Consequently, such leaders usually adopt "bad" policies, measures that undermine the public interest but benefit ruling elites and their cronies (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Inspired by this framework, Bader investigates the nexus between the distributional coalition and autocratic cooperation (Bader, 2015a). She finds it mutually beneficial for autocracies to cooperate since both sides could consolidate their winning coalitions domestically through such collaboration: "Interaction at the international level creates benefits which those involved can pass on to their domestic winning coalition" (Bader, 2015b). Elites in target states benefit from illiberal powers to buy off members of the winning coalition. In return, the resources of the target states are at such powers' disposal. Given Bader's focus on the rationale of complying with Beijing's economic activism, she does not pay too much attention to the political consequence of such interaction. Bader argues that closer links between China and authoritarian states could assist the political survival of the latter, but the empirical evidence is neither systematic nor conclusive (Bader, 2015a: 30-31)

Based on the logic of the selectorate theory, ruling elites have to decide on a balance between revenue and spending. The character of public goods is that it usually takes time for them to generate political support for the ruling administration. Instead, resources offered by illiberal powers would quickly satisfy the need of incumbent elites to reward members of the winning coalition, no matter what kinds of goods are required. Thus, the ruling elites in the target state enjoy a disproportionate (if not illegal) advantage in political competition, and their likelihood of political survival significantly increases. Regarding regime dynamics, external links with illiberal powers could distort the level of political competition and undermine the democratisation process.

The above discussion suggests the positive impact of economic links on the political survival of incumbent elites. It is worth bearing in mind that some factors can intervene in this causal mechanism. Firstly, the desire of incumbent elites to manipulate external resources is constrained by the institutional character, especially the difference between nominal and actual selectorate among regimes. Second, Cao and Ward argue that regime stability could influence decision-makers in calculating public goods provision (Cao and Ward, 2015). If incumbent leaders do not have high expectations of regime duration, they would be reluctant to offer public goods. In this case, external resources become significantly attractive for them to exploit. In other words, a shorter time horizon could amplify the influence of external links.

Before applying the selectorate theory in the context of Southeast Asia, the conceptual ambiguity deserves clarification first. Despite some degree of liberalisation since the 1980s, the overall regime dynamics in Southeast Asia fail to meet most democratic standards (Case, 2015). Croissant and Bünte classify Southeast Asian states into three distinct types: electoral authoritarian regimes, unambiguous autocracies, and countries undergoing democratic transition (Croissant and Bünte, 2011). The complex nature of the regime character increases the difficulty of operationalisation. Bueno de Mesquita et al. argue that the concept of “winning coalition” could offer “a more nuanced understanding of political dynamics than is achieved through the use of categorical regime labels” (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 55). By using information from the Polity Project, their operationalisation of the winning coalition set a 5-stage scale (from 0 to 1) to reflect different levels of winning coalition size (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). However, this indicator still cannot capture subtle differences between formal institutional features and de facto configuration. For instance, the size of the winning coalition in Thailand after the 2014 coup was zero, according to Bueno de Mesquita et al. criteria because “military regimes are assumed to have particularly small coalitions” (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 134). However, this is an underestimation, given the role played by the Thai military in domestic politics. Therefore, indicators devised from the selectorate theory may not be sufficient to observe the theoretical expectation. Alternative research methods like process-tracing are needed to showcase the nuances of political interplay in different countries.

The following sections will examine these arguments by observing recent developments in four Southeast Asian countries. While the impact

of the “China factor” has been noted in the literature since the early 2010s, only a few studies directly address the effects of BRI.<sup>2</sup> This study intends to fill the gap by offering an up-to-date evaluation. China’s BRI did not launch until 2013, so its influence could only surface afterward. Therefore, political changes between 2015 and 2020 provide a suitable body of cases for examining the possible linkage between regime dynamics and “autocracy export” by Beijing. Before moving to the case studies, it is necessary to have a closer overview of the BRI and its presence in Southeast Asia.

### **3. BRI as a Conduit for Autocracy Export**

Since President Xi Jinping proclaimed the ideas of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013, BRI has become the guiding strategy in China’s foreign policy agenda. The two arms of the initiative converge on Europe, with the Silk Road Economic Belt running along the land route via Central Asia. At the same time, the Maritime Silk Road “loops south and westward by sea towards Europe” (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015). Officially, BRI is intended to strengthen connectivity among participating countries under the leadership of Beijing and build up China’s soft power internationally. In practice, the realisation of this vision mainly depends on two policy instruments: large-scale financial outputs and foreign direct investment.

In terms of financial output, Beijing has created several vehicles to channel surplus capital, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the Silk Road Fund (SRF). In addition, primary banks and financial institutions in China, such as the China Development Bank (CDB), CIC Capital (a subsidiary of PRC’s sovereign wealth fund), and the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank), are being used for similar purposes in BRI-related projects (Bermingham, 2016a; 2016b). According to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the cumulative amount invested under BRI from 2013 to 2018 has surpassed \$650 billion, and over 100 countries have begun cooperation with China within the BRI framework (Hsueh, 2020). Through this connection, outbound policy loans, equity investments, and acquisitions increased significantly from 2015. Additionally, government-to-government deals in the infrastructure and energy sectors held a large share (Bermingham, 2016b). Although China has been a major global investor since 2005, most of its investments went to advanced economies in the years before the BRI.



However, beginning in 2013, China deliberately redirected its outbound capital toward the developing world.

Generally, foreign direct investment plays a crucial role in establishing “connectivity” between Beijing and participating societies. Of the types of investment projects undertaken, infrastructure development draws a lot of attention. From the supply-side perspective, these investments were adopted to address China’s predicament of overcapacity (Zhou et al., 2015). Public and private enterprises were encouraged to go abroad and participate in a variety of projects (Schuman, 2015). For example, Beijing had invested significantly in energy production in Nigeria, Algeria, Russia, Venezuela, and Indonesia. It also continued its massive input in transportation construction in countries such as Cambodia (Chen and Yang, 2013). Following the announcement of BRI, the relevance of infrastructure construction was elevated to the extent that most people view BRI as synonymous with China’s highway/railway diplomacy. The attention to infrastructure projects under BRI ranges from transportation and communication (like optical cable networks), to the energy industry (power plants and electricity grids). Since most partner countries of BRI are keen to upgrade their infrastructure, Beijing’s proposals would be too appealing to decline. In an official document that discusses the “visions and actions” of BRI, facility connectivity is viewed as one of the five major aspects of cooperation (China, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

In terms of both size and scope, the BRI qualifies as the “external factor” in the theoretical framework discussed above. Massive output from foreign countries could significantly impact the target society economically and politically. Logically, countries with stronger “linkage” to China are more likely to regress along the autocracy-democracy spectrum. This study uses the CFR Belt and Road Tracker developed by the Council on Foreign Relations. The dataset collects information on Beijing’s policy output from 2000 to 2017, focusing on three indicators: imports from China, foreign direct investment (FDI) from China, and external debt to China (Steil and Della Rocca, 2019).

Table 1 reports changes in these indicators from 2013 (the year BRI was announced) to 2017 in Southeast Asian countries. Regarding FDI, most regional states, except the Philippines, received increased investments from China, with significant growth in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Regarding external debt, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Singapore’s

liabilities accumulated rapidly after BRI's launch.<sup>4</sup> Countries like Myanmar relied on Beijing's capital and investment to upgrade its economy after the military junta decided to liberalise the country. It also bears in mind that the rising power of the Chinese economy would generally increase Beijing's economic presence worldwide, and even relatively developed countries like Singapore have enhanced their connection with China. Therefore, a clear pattern of dependence emerges. Generally, all Southeast Asian states (except the Philippines) in Table 1 show increasing economic connections with China. FDI from China in Malaysia jumped from 0.2 per cent to 2.7 per cent in five years and Indonesia's debt to China doubled in the same period.

**Table 1. Changes in the Economic Relationship between PRC and Southeast Asia after BRI**

	<b>FDI from PRC (percentage of inward FDI)</b>	<b>External debt to PRC (percentage of GDP)</b>
Cambodia	5.9% (2013) → 3.0% (2017)	38.6% (2013) → 22.4% (2017)
Indonesia	0.9% (2013) → 2.2% (2017)	0.6% (2013) → 1.3% (2017)
Malaysia	0.2% (2013) → 2.7% (2017)	0.2% (2013) → 0.2% (2017)
Thailand	1.8% (2013) → 2.0% (2017)	0.5% (2013) → 0.9% (2017)
Philippines	0.3% (2013) → 0.1% (2017)	0.1% (2013) → 0.2% (2017)
Myanmar	0% (2013) → 56.5% (2017)	1.1% (2013) → 5.2% (2017)
Singapore	3.0% (2013) → 3.5% (2017)	0.4% (2013) → 2.7% (2017)

Source: *Belt and Road Tracker*. <https://www.cfr.org/article/belt-and-road-tracker>

#### 4. The Southeast Asian Experience

According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BRI implementation did not occur until 2015. Therefore, attributing political developments in the first half of the 2010s to BRI is problematic logically. However, in Southeast Asia, significant episodes of political change occurred in Cambodia (2018), Malaysia (2018), Indonesia (2019), and Thailand (2019), constituting appropriate cases of observation.

As stated above, not countries but specific elites survive the political competition. However, this causal mechanism is dependent on the actual configuration of power and time horizon. Simply put, countries with a larger winning coalition or longer time horizon are less likely to become victims of autocracy export. While all four countries had relatively close ties under

BRI with China, political survival occurred in most cases except Malaysia. Nevertheless, these countries' pre-election and post-election developments showed nuances that do not conform to theoretical expectations. The following discussion investigates the cases separately.

#### **4.1 Cambodia**

Among Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia is probably the model for a bilateral partnership with China. The Hun Sen administration is not embarrassed to defend Beijing's position on the international and regional stage. When the maritime disputes in the South China Sea intensified in the 2010s, Cambodia blocked ASEAN's efforts to reach a joint stance several times, undermining the legacy of regional solidarity. (Tomiya, 2016).

The 1997 coup was a watershed in the bilateral tie between Hun Sen and Beijing. Whereas it was condemned by Western countries and ASEAN (Cambodia's membership application was postponed as a result), China was the first country to offer friendship and help, and a strong relationship began to develop despite past rivalries during the civil war. It is estimated that approximately US\$10 billion capital was offered by China to Cambodia between 2003 and 2013, and projects ranging from infrastructure construction to special economic zone foretold the practices of BRI. The influx of Chinese capital allowed the Cambodian government to cultivate a network of crony politics that benefited both Chinese and Cambodian elites. The scam scandal exposed in early 2022 in the Cambodian port city of Sihanoukville vividly depicted the dynamic. Cambodia and China signed an agreement in 2010 to jointly develop the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) in the city. As Cambodia's largest special economic zone, SSEZ naturally became a landmark project after Cambodia officially became a BRI partner in 2016. The growing economic linkage can be observed in the rising number of Chinese nationals living in Cambodia. Compared with around 80,000 Chinese nationals living in Cambodia in 2013, 200,000 Chinese lived in Sihanoukville by 2019 (Rim 2022). Moreover, Cambodia has become the regional hub of organised crime, suggesting the private rather than public nature that Chinese economic presence could contribute. Only those in connection with political power can enjoy the goods.

Domestically, the reciprocal mechanism helped Hun Sen to consolidate his winning coalition and prevail in the 2003 and 2008 general elections. The ruling party won three-quarters of Congress seats in 2008. Nevertheless, the

rise of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) in the 2013 election created a formidable challenge to the Hun Sen government, which resulted in the latter securing only 48 per cent of the popular vote. In addition, rising criticisms about human rights and the rule of law from Western countries and international society have increased Hun Sen's sense of insecurity. To secure political power, Hun Sen had to maintain its dependence on China's support, while strengthening its control over domestic society. According to a 2016 study, an additional \$13 billion has been promised to Cambodia (Kynge et al., 2016). Despite the declining trend in Table 1, Beijing remains Phenom Penh's most significant economic patron. The linkage is so strong that Hun Sen even contended, "If I don't rely on China, who will I rely on?" in a forum held in Tokyo in 2021 (Nikkei Asia, 2021).

Nevertheless, the more relevant measures occurred in the domestic arena. Hun Sen enhanced political repression against opposition leaders and activists after the 2013 election, obviously to restructure the political field. Thus, by dissolving the CNRP in 2017, imprisoning its leader, Kem Sokha, and clamping down on the media and activists, the ruling CPP quickly took all 125 seats in the 2018 general election. On the other hand, Hun Sen's plan to transform Cambodia into a personal dynasty surfaced in the late 2010s as he called for his comrades to retire with him together. In return, their children will inherit the positions and influences, and the new network of nepotism is under the leadership of Hun Sen's son Hun Manet (Brook and Rathana, 2023). The succession of the winning coalition was successful as Hun Sen officially handed over power to his son after the 2023 general election. Given these efforts, Hun Sen said the CPP would remain dominant for "as long as a century," and the opposition "should wait until the next life" (Reuters, 2020). The close partnership between Cambodia and China (cause) and the growing trend of the Hun Sen dynasty (effect) confirms the autocracy export thesis. However, a closer examination suggests the critical role played by the incumbent elites to exploit external support for political survival, and the prospect of democracy in Cambodia has faded away.

#### *4.2 Malaysia*

In 2018, for the first time, Malaysians declined to elect the National Front (B.N.) as the political leadership of the federation. The opposition Pakatan Harapan (P.H.) coalition, led by former premier Mahathir Mohamad, achieved an unprecedented victory in the lower house. The National Front

(B.N.) has encountered severe challenges since the mid-2000s, and Prime Minister Najib Razak's involvement in the 1MDB scandal was viewed as the primary reason for B.N.'s loss in 2018.

Established in 2009, 1MDB was a strategic development company aimed at driving long-term economic growth for Malaysia. However, its operation fell into a sophisticated fraud orchestrated by a Penang-based financier, Jho Low. Through his ties with Najib's stepson, Low gained Najib's trust and began siphoning money to satisfy the Prime Minister's family while embezzling company assets with Najib's endorsement and protection (Wright and Hope, 2018). With Low's generous donations, Najib overcame the risk of losing the general election in 2013.

The scandal began to unravel in 2015 and significantly diminished Najib's legitimacy. An investigation revealed that approximately \$700 million was channelled into Najib's pocket, and \$3.5 billion of the state-owned sovereign fund was allegedly laundered (Lee, 2016). To offset these losses, Jho Low went to China for help. In November 2015, China General Nuclear Power Group purchased the energy assets (13 power stations) from 1MDB at \$2.3 billion (Venkat and Carew, 2015). Two months later, one of China's largest state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the China Railway Group Limited (CREC), collaborated with Iskandar Waterfront Holdings to win the bid for Bandar Malaysia, an ambitious urban development project close to Kuala Lumpur with an estimated budget of \$53 billion over 15 years. Furthermore, CREC announced an additional \$2 billion commitment to set up its Asia-Pacific regional headquarters in Bandar Malaysia. Prime Minister Najib welcomed the investment swiftly: "A company like CREC moves very fast, so we have to respond equally fast" (Associated Press, 2016).

In June 2016, Jho Low visited Beijing to discuss the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and natural gas pipeline projects with China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission. The proposed budget was twice the amount recommended by consultation agencies. Moreover, both sides agreed to utilise these projects to indirectly repay 1MDB's debt (Wright and Hope, 2018). The unusual format of these projects was justified by the grand vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), although the business rate of return is questionable. Political, rather than economic, motivation prevailed in projects like ECRL and Bandar Malaysia. Indeed, the excessive enthusiasm of the Malaysian leadership for BRI projects raised eyebrows in the media, and the Prime Minister was blamed for "selling his country to China" (Bowring, 2018).

In July 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a civil lawsuit against Najib's stepson and Jho Low. The snowballing scandal placed significant pressure on the Malaysian leadership. Moreover, dissatisfaction began to grow within the ruling party UMNO. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and former Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin publicly chastised the administration and asked for Najib's resignation. During a case hearing on 5 September, 2016, Mahathir met Anwar Ibrahim at Kuala Lumpur High Court. The first meeting in 18 years between these former enemies signalled an emerging alliance against the incumbent administration. As the winning coalition showed signs of breaking up, the concern for survival occupied the Prime Minister. Najib increased political repression, removed dissidents from within the ruling camp, and forced the Attorney-General to retire to forestall the potential investigation against him. Moreover, his visit to China in November 2016 concluded with 14 agreements for projects reportedly worth \$34.7 billion (Siwage and Tham, 2020). These measures, combined with the continued suppression of opposition figures, led to NGOs such as Freedom House issuing warnings about the deterioration of democracy in Malaysia (Parameswaran, 2016).

Najib's attempts to consolidate power failed during the 2018 general election. Prime Minister Mahathir, after his victory, emphasised the need to review cooperation agreements with China. During his visit to China in August 2018, he expressed concern about "neocolonialism" in the presence of Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and pointed out the desirability of "fair trade" (Hornby, 2018). The Pakatan Harapan (PH) government renegotiated the conditions of the ECRL and Bandar Malaysia projects to reduce the financial burden. The revised ECRL project cost 32 per cent less than the original budgeted amount. However, concluding that the PH government fundamentally changed its policy toward BRI would be difficult. In April 2019, Mahathir participated in the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing and expressed his full support for the BRI by delivering a speech at the ceremony. In addition to his desire to bargain for better terms, Mahathir's dramatic change of stance had much to do with political dynamics within Malaysia.

On the surface, the 2018 regime change in Malaysia challenged our theoretical expectations because close ties between Beijing and Najib failed to keep the incumbents in office. However, it is important to bear in mind that, from the very first day, the PH government has been struggling with

the structural predicament of Malaysian politics: ethnic rivalry. Malay elites' entrenched distrust of the Chinese population made the winning coalition susceptible to fracture. The fragile cohesion among coalition members made it difficult for the leadership to continue policies aligned with the public interest. Disagreements about power succession escalated in late 2019, leading to the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad as the Prime Minister and the collapse of the PH government on 29 February, 2020. The defection of MPs within the PH coalition and disagreements between Mahathir and his own Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU) indicated a significant change in the structure of the ruling coalition. Muhyiddin replaced Mahathir as the Prime Minister, and his government relied significantly on the support of UMNO to defeat the non-confidence motion launched by his former comrades.

In July 2020, the Kuala Lumpur High Court found former Prime Minister Najib guilty of corruption. Some activists considered the unprecedented verdict as a victory for the rule of law in Malaysia. Nevertheless, it might be too early to draw such a conclusion if relevant events are considered. For example, the Muhyiddin government appointed a new Attorney-General, and the graft case involving Najib's stepson, Riza Aziz, a central figure in the 1MDB scandal, was dismissed (Takashi Nakano, 2020). Moreover, Najib's appeal against the corruption verdict and remaining charges may deliver essentially different results given the record of the Malaysian judiciary.

For the Malaysian public, events since March 2020 have been a repeat of history, as old plots and characters have reemerged. Thus, the resolve of Malaysian elites to address corruption remains uncertain, especially at a time when they continue to welcome Beijing's investment projects. Prime Minister Muhyiddin vowed to proceed with the ECRL to stimulate economic growth, and the modified project faced another round of revision with a re-route (Barrock and Tan, 2020; Hart, 2020).

The political change in 2018 generated optimism about democratisation in Malaysia. Moreover, dissatisfaction with corruption allowed Malaysia to decrease its reliance on Beijing. However, the deep-rooted ethnic rivalry undermined the PH government's prospect of achieving its campaign promises. Political instability allowed China's economic presence to stay and maintained its "function" as the incentive for ambitious elites. From Najib, Mahathir to Muhyiddin, BRI remained the undeniable factor in Malaysian politics, and the prospect of democratisation turned dim again during the 2020 crisis.

### 4.3 *Indonesia*

The re-election of Joko Widodo (hereafter Jokowi) in the 2019 Presidential election was generally regarded as a victory for pro-democracy forces in Indonesia. As the first president who did not belong to the circle of traditional elites, Jokowi attracted significant support from middle- and lower-class citizens with his promise to bring equitable development and liberal politics to the country. The prospect of realising his promises naturally hinged on how the new government would respond to Beijing's BRI initiative.

The first term of Jokowi's presidency witnessed steady growth in Chinese investment, focusing on the transport, storage, and communication sectors. He strategically utilised Beijing's resources to realise his infrastructure development objectives. After attending the first BRI Summit in May 2017, he asked Maritime Affairs Minister Luhut Pandjaitan to prepare a list of priority plans that could become the subject of bilateral cooperation (Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, 2019). In April 2018, Indonesian and Chinese companies signed an investment agreement for projects that included a steel smelter, a hydropower plant, and an industrial park, involving an amount of \$23.3 billion (Silaen, 2018). It was apparent that Jakarta intended to channel Beijing's resources to projects located in remote areas. Additionally, the Indonesian government, wary of the risk of increasing debt, emphasised the importance of private-sector cooperation (The Jakarta Post, 2019).

Financial considerations were the primary driver for Jakarta's choice of China as the bid-winner in the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway project. Apart from the lower cost (\$5.5 billion from China versus \$6.2 billion from Japan), the willingness of Beijing to accept a business-to-business scheme (without any contribution from the Indonesian public budget) excluded Japan from the competition (Tiezzi, 2015a). According to the deal, the 150-kilometer high-speed rail line was to be completed in 2019 to display the win-win cooperation between the two countries.

As the flagship project for China's BRI in Indonesia, the development of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway after 2015 diverged from original expectations. The construction stalled due to land acquisition and the outbreak of the coronavirus. These challenges are primarily intertwined with Indonesia's domestic politics. Local resistance to land acquisition reflected a different approach to public construction in reformasi Indonesia, and the



Jokowi government had no intention to resume the old practice of top-down rule by fiat (Suzuki and Kotani, 2017). As a result, only 85 per cent of the required land was secured one year after the groundbreaking ceremony. It was reported that Jokowi tried to mediate a resolution of the land acquisition dispute himself, as he had previously done as governor of Jakarta. However, the idea became unfeasible when the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election began. Jokowi's relations with the incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is ethnically Chinese, soon became the target of criticism by the opposition groups. The resulting loss of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and the blasphemy conviction of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama suggested how easily anti-Chinese sentiment could be mobilised. As a popularity-based leader, Jokowi could not neglect such a lesson, and the forthcoming presidential election would be no exception.

Indeed, Prabowo Subianto, the presidential candidate from the opposition camp, fiercely criticised Jokowi's congenial stance toward Beijing and accused the Jokowi government of "selling" the country. One widely circulated rumour suggested that by admitting Chinese investment, Jokowi allowed thousands of Chinese workers to migrate to Indonesia and fill job vacancies. As remarked by certain writers, "The impact of illegal Chinese workers is too obvious...in addition to our large debt to China" (Maulia and Tani, 2019; Siwage and Tham, 2020). Opposition figures employed misinformation tactics to mobilise public support and undermine the incumbent government, but the collateral damage to the bilateral projects underway could not be overlooked. Having been decried by populist Prabowo supporters as a Chinese puppet, Jokowi found it politically expedient to distance himself from China during the 2019 election. The original idea to exploit BRI for domestic infrastructure upgrades was sidelined, if not abandoned entirely. Even after his victory, Jokowi's stance toward Beijing showed little change as he attempted to depict himself as a defender of the national interest during the Natuna island incident (Yulisman, 2020).

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the high-speed rail project did not resume until the second half of 2020. The Chinese media continued to report on developments such as the tunnel breakthrough and the connection of continuous beams along the route (Xinhua Net, 2020). However, Jakarta's decision to invite Japan as a potential partner for extending the high-speed railway reflected Jakarta's caution about excessive reliance on Beijing. It

has been reported that the extension of the Jakarta-Bandung rail to Surabaya is now included in the priority projects listed for the 2020-2024 period. In addition, the President played a critical role in the decision to invite Japan into the consortium (Koya Jibiki, 2020).

It is clear that Indonesia took a cautious approach to the generous BRI offer despite the deepening economic ties between the two countries. Electoral politics mitigated the political impact of economic dependence on China. Nevertheless, it is still possible that Indonesia will follow the example of its neighbours. For President Jokowi to realise his vision of transforming Indonesia, he may need to resume the strategy of taking advantage of the BRI with little regard for its political consequences. Coordinating Minister Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan's visit to China in October 2020 was an intriguing illustration of such a possibility (Albert, 2020).

#### **4.4 Thailand**

The political situation in Thailand deteriorated again in 2013. Once recognised as the most promising example of democratic transition in Southeast Asia, the prospect of freedom and democracy suffered significantly in the military coup in 2014, the promulgation of the new constitution, and the enthronement of Vajiralongkorn in 2017. The new constitution created a political competition favourable to the ruling generals and their clients. In addition, the reluctance of the royal family to make political concessions has decreased the probability of compromise. Taken together, Thailand can currently be categorised as an electoral authoritarian regime.

Chronologically, the decay of Thailand's political regime coincided with Beijing's grand strategy of the BRI. Beijing's flagship project in Thailand is the Northeastern High-Speed Rail (Northeastern HSR), which connects Bangkok and Nong Khai, a city on the Thai-Laos border. From Beijing's perspective, this railway line constitutes an integral part of the Pan-Asia railway network that will connect China's Southwest with Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> Thailand proposed the Northeastern HSR in 2010 and sought technical assistance from China, and the "rice for high-speed rail" deal was concluded by the Yingluck government in 2013. This scheme remained unaffected after the 2014 coup (Tiezzi, 2015b). In December 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang attended the memorandum of understanding signing ceremony.<sup>6</sup> However, the Northeastern HSR did not proceed as smoothly as expected after its groundbreaking in December 2015 (Goh and Webb, 2016).

Behind the smoke and dust on the construction site, Thailand and China have been struggling to agree on the HSR project's terms. Korn Chatikavanij, former Thai Finance Minister and a proponent of the Northeastern HSR, emphasised the geostrategic interests that Beijing could acquire from the project, stating that China should pay for what it gets from the project and that the "financial burden should not fall entirely on Thailand" (Crispin, 2016a). Dissatisfied with the loan offer from China's Export-Import Bank (with a 2.3 per cent interest rate), Bangkok continuously demanded a more favourable deal and eventually decided to cover the expense of the first phase of Northeastern HSR with domestic funds rather than a Chinese loan (Thodsapol Hongtong, 2019).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the payment plan became another point of disagreement, as Beijing preferred payment in U.S. dollars rather than Thai Baht. Thus, the two sides did not ink the official contract of Northeastern HSR (phase one) until late October 2020, five years after the commencement of construction.

The severely delayed paperwork reflects the mercurial nature of bilateral ties. Initially, Premier Prayut cancelled the joint project in early 2016, stating that Thailand would build a revised line independently. However, when China failed to invite Premier Prayut to the first BRI forum in 2017, the military junta invoked the controversial Section 44 in the interim constitution to bypass the administrative obstacles and kick-start the project. Additionally, a consortium led by China Railway Construction Corporation Limited won the bid for Thailand's Eastern High-Speed Rail Link in December 2018, a centrepiece of Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor initiative. This development was viewed as a milestone of China's BRI in Thailand.

Thailand's increasing reliance on China also occurred in the sensitive area of military cooperation. The Royal Thai Army has had a warm relationship with its Chinese counterpart since the 2014 coup. In late 2017, China delivered 28 VT4 battle tanks to Thailand, and it was later reported that the Thai Army intended to procure more VT4 tanks (Nanuam, 2019). Meanwhile, Thailand's navy decided to purchase China's Yuan-class (S-26T) submarines. Bangkok placed the order for the first S-26T submarine (with the intention of buying two more) in 2017 for US\$1.1 billion, and the military junta justified the submarine deal with the rising risk in the South China Sea. However, in April 2020, Bangkok suspended its second and third submarine orders due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (Liu, 2020). Nevertheless, such a tentative suspension can be reversed at any time, as the

first submarine is expected to be delivered in 2023 (Parameswaran, 2019). Given Washington's lukewarm attitude towards the military government and pressure to resume civilian rule, it was rational for the ruling generals to seek a counter-balance by enhancing military cooperation with Beijing (Crispin, 2016b; Corben, 2016). The inconsistency between economic cooperation and military purchases revealed the weakness of Bangkok and undermined the efforts of domestic technical officials to push for better terms for Thailand under the Northeastern HSR project.

The aspiration of returning to civilian rule dimmed when the military junta promulgated a self-serving constitution and refused to hold national elections on time. The crisis of royal succession exacerbated the standoff. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, regarded as the authoritative mediator in political struggles, passed away in October 2016. His death was a natural excuse for the military junta to postpone the national election. In the 2014 coup, the military junta was not severely challenged, partly due to its promise to bring back stability and development. However, the public's patience diminished after the new constitution was adopted and the King's funeral in 2017. As a result, the ruling generals faced increasing pressure to lift restrictions on political activity and civil liberties.

Right after the coup, the military government had more leeway to shape the policy agenda concerning the HSR project (it was politically expedient to distance themselves from the Yingluck administration). Hence, disagreements regarding finance and land development along railway routes were seriously discussed (Sangwongwanich, 2016). To counter the pressure from Beijing, Thailand sought to cooperate with Japan on another high-speed railway project connecting Chiang Mai and Bangkok (Northern HSR) in 2015.

The growing pressure against authoritarian rule, together with the instability of the winning coalition following the royal succession, eventually compelled the military junta to hold a national election in 2019. Returning to the electoral process made it imperative for the ruling generals to form a winning coalition larger than before. In addition to the self-serving constitution, Thai generals, who could hardly be seen as defenders of democratic values, had no difficulty exploiting all possible resources to survive the political competition. Hence, the Northeastern HSR project's instrumental value prevailed over the public interest concern. The policy attitude of Bangkok towards the Northeastern HSR, even as similar projects

in Malaysia and Indonesia faced difficulties, became increasingly responsive to Beijing's demand. The political situation in Thailand did not stabilise after the 2019 elections, despite General Prayut's successful retention of the premiership. As democracy failed to resume, Thailand's dependence on China seemed to grow, as reflected in Bangkok's reluctance to restrict Chinese tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic and the finalisation of the first phase of the HSR contract later.

Table 2 summarises relevant variables and the political developments of four cases. All four Southeast Asian countries had rather close ties with China under BRI, and political survival occurred in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Nevertheless, the pre-election and post-election developments in these countries showed nuances that justified the role played by domestic factors. The variation of winning coalition conditions the effect of autocracy export, and a smaller coalition size could increase the likelihood of democratic backsliding/authoritarian resilience. The power succession in Cambodia after the 2023 election offers the latest piece of evidence. On the other hand, the electoral democracy set in the *reformasi era* has been sustained in Indonesia, restricting political elites' desire to concentrate exclusively on their supporting groups. As a result, democracy in Indonesia remains stable compared with regional neighbours. Whereas incumbent leaders tend to exploit the convenient goods offered by illiberal powers, political survival does not necessarily lead to autocracy export. The dynamics of the selectorate group play a role in the result of regime evolution.

**Table 2. BRI, political survival, and regime dynamics**

	<b>Economic links since BRI</b>	<b>Winning coalition*</b>	<b>Year of Election</b>	<b>Political survival</b>	<b>Democratic transition/consolidation</b>
Cambodia	Remain strong	Small	2018	Yes	No
Malaysia	Increase	Medium	2018	No	No
Indonesia	Increase	Large	2019	Yes	
Thailand	Increase	Medium	2019	Yes	No

*Source: Collected by the author*

## 5. Conclusion

By discussing four cases in Southeast Asia, this study offers an updated assessment of the political impact of China's BRI strategy. It provides an opportunity to evaluate the autocracy export in the regional context. Compared with the consensus on the geopolitical advantage that Beijing could benefit from, the effect of BRI on the target countries lacks objective evaluation but rather sentimental claims in the media. Concentrating on the strategic calculation of the ruling elites in BRI partner countries, we argue that China's BRI could influence recipient states' political dynamics. However, the mechanism between the cause (economic diplomacy of illiberal powers) and the consequence (regime dynamics) is neither straightforward nor associated with normative intention. The variation in the selectorate structures of respective countries could either increase or reduce the effect of autocracy export.

The empirical analysis finds that China's significant investments and capital-output offered an accessible resource pool that ambitious politicians could exploit for regime survival. Incumbent elites in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand successfully remained in power after the inauguration of BRI. In Malaysia, the failure of UMNO in the 2018 election suggests the limits of abusing external resources. Nevertheless, the ethnically-distorted selectorate structure and short time horizon forced Mahathir and Muhyiddin governments to yield to the Chinese offer again. As a result, the optimistic prospect of democratisation in 2018 soon faded away.

The four cases discussed in this article all experienced major political episodes within five years of BRI's inauguration, but the political economy explanation also seems persuasive in other regional countries. In Myanmar, Beijing's importance has fluctuated since liberalisation began in the early 2010s. While the Thein Sein government was cautious about economic cooperation with Beijing, the National League for Democracy elites after 2016 had no problem accepting support from China. The veto power held by the military in the constitution renders an unusual selectorate configuration and makes civil leaders eager for survival. After the 2021 coup, the military junta resumed direct control of the country despite a shrinking winning coalition. Given the unending civil war, strengthening bilateral ties with Beijing was a natural turn for the generals. On the other hand, the demand for a larger winning coalition in the Philippines enables a more resilient democracy even after an autocracy-oriented and pro-China presidency.

Beijing made generous promises after Duterte expressed his desire for the China model, but the political dynamics of the Philippines failed to show the trend of democratic backsliding. While the alliance of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte in the 2022 election can be taken as a sign of political survival, the subsequent developments fail to support the story of autocracy export.

Theoretically, this study confirms the need to address the target state's internal dynamics. While it is difficult to differentiate the impacts of the external factor on targets, the interactions within the target countries could be the key to understanding the causal effect. The empirical discussion of this article showcases that this domestic-oriented, rationality-based perspective offers persuasive analysis. Secondly, the analysis of four Southeast Asian states enhances our understanding of China in the area. Whether in mature democracy or staunch autocracy, incumbent elites consistently face the seduction posed by illiberal powers such as China. The prospect of avoiding democratic retreat hinges mainly on the operation of supporting measures. Finally, economic links derived from BRI primarily involve FDI and external debt; both seem to have less influence on target states than export dependence. However, projects under BRI in Southeast Asia, once finished, will eventually stimulate trade relations between China and these neighbours. In other words, BRI's effects may gradually emerge as time goes by. The political consequence of this BRI-related trade should be investigated carefully in the future, as Beijing's attitude toward autocracy export may change with its ascending status and growing ambition.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As Risse and Babayan mention, the policy output of Western powers cannot be seen as a given, but varies with two conditions: stability and geostrategic concerns. Thus, "non-democratic regional powers will seek to countervail United States and European Union democracy support when geostrategic interests are at stake or when regime survival at home is at risk." (Risse and Babayan, 2015) Bader et al. also have a similar observation and conclude that the incentive of autocratic regional powers toward regime convergence is weighted against the interest of political stability (Bader et al. 2010). In other words, the unstable condition of the target states could stimulate authoritarian powers to transfer incentives to action.

- <sup>2</sup> For example, Bader and his colleagues (2015) take China as the case to depict their theory of regime export. However, their analysis only covers Beijing's behaviour towards Cambodia and Myanmar before 2010. Since 2010, significant developments have taken place in both the authoritarian power and target states. It is necessary to examine whether these new phenomena support or challenge the theory.
- <sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that while Beijing's propaganda highlights transportation projects, a significant portion of the investments was made in the energy sector. Hence, some argue that BRI resembles the energy diplomacy agenda pursued before 2013 with the objective of satisfying China's demand in the future.
- <sup>4</sup> Although the dataset also reports the imports from China, this indicator is not included in this study given our focus on financial output and FDI. In addition, the implication of imports could be two-way rather than overwhelmingly dependent on China.
- <sup>5</sup> The Trans-Asia railway network was originally proposed in mid-1990s by Southeast Asian political leaders such as then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, and the idea was included in the long-term railroad network project by Beijing in 2004 (Wu 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> The original plan included two rail lines constructed by China to connect the China-Laos railway. On the other hand, Thailand decided to cooperate with Japan in the high-speed railway connecting Chiangmai and Bangkok a few months later.
- <sup>7</sup> In addition to the interest rate, Thailand refused to allow Beijing having access to the land-rights along the route, a condition China enjoys in many overseas railroad projects.

## Reference List

Albert, Eleanor. (2020, October 15), "Indonesian Special Envoy Visits China in Show of Cooperation", *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/indonesian-special-envoy-visits-china-in-show-of-cooperation/>>.



- Ambrosio, Thomas. (2010), “Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion: Concepts, Dynamics, and Future Research”, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 375-392.
- Associated Press. (2016, March 21), “China Railway Plans Regional HQ in Malaysia, Eyes High-Speed Rail,” *EEWorld Online*. <<https://www.eeworldonline.com/china-railway-plans-regional-hq-in-malaysia-eyes-high-speed-rail/>>.
- Bader, Julia (2015a), “China, Autocratic Patron? An Empirical Investigation of China as a Factor in Autocratic Survival”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 23-33.
- Bader, Julia (2015b), “The Political Economy of External Exploitation. A Comparative Investigation of China’s Foreign Relations”, *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 1-21.
- Bader, Julia, Jörn Grävingholt, and Antje Kästner (2010), “Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy? A Political Economy Perspective on Regime-type Export in Regional Neighborhoods”, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 81-100.
- Barrock, Jose and Tan Choe Choe. (2020, July 13), “Newsbreak: ECRL Could See Change in Alignment Again”, *The Edge*. <<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/newsbreak-ecrl-could-see-change-alignment-again>>.
- Bermingham, Finbarr. (2016, June 7), “AIIB and NDB Dominate China’s Outbound Investment”, *Global Trade Review*. <<http://www.gtreview.com/news/asia/aiib-and-ndb-dominate-chinas-outbound-investment-do-not-publish/>>.
- Bermingham, Finbarr. (2016, January 20), “One Belt One Road Sends Chinese Outbound Lending to 7-year high”, *Global Trade Review*. <<http://www.gtreview.com/news/asia/china-outbound-lending-reaches-seven-year-high/>>.
- Bowring, Philip. (2016, July 27), “Desperate to Survive, Malaysia’s PM Sells his Country to China”, *Asia Sentinel*. <<http://www.asiasentinel.com/econ-business/malaysia-pm-sells-country-to-china/>>.
- Brook, Jack and Phin Rathana (2023, May 2), “Cambodia’s Hun Sen Plans Power Succession to Son, Allies’ Children”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Cambodia-s-Hun-Sen-plans-power-succession-to-son-allies-children>>
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James

- D. Morrow (2003), *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, M.A., MIT Press.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce and Alastair Smith (2012), *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is almost always good politics*, New York City, New York, Public Affairs.
- Cao, X. and Hugh Ward (2015), "Winning Coalition Size, State Capacity, and Time Horizons: An Application of Modified Selectorate Theory to Environmental Public Goods Provision", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 264-279.
- Case, William (2015), "Democracy's mixed fortunes in Southeast Asia: Torpor, Change, and Trade-offs", in William Case (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, Routledge, pp.3-22.
- Chen, Dingding and Katrin Kinzelbach (2015), "Democracy promotion and China: blocker or bystander?", *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 400-418.
- Chen, Ian Tsung-Yen and Alan Hao Yang (2013), "A harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory typologies of ASEAN countries' strategies to the rise of China", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 265-288.
- China. (2015, March 28), *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*. National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, <[http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330\\_669367.html](http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html)>.
- Corben, Ron. (2016, May 26), "Thailand, China Step Up Military Cooperation", *VOA*. <<http://www.voanews.com/a/thailand-china-military-cooperation/3346960.html>>.
- Crispin, Shawn W. (2016, April 1), "China-Thailand Railway Project Gets Untracked", *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/thailands-post-coup-foreign-policy-omnidirectional-or-directionless/>>.
- Crispin, Shawn W. (2016, June 10), "Thailand's Post-Coup Foreign Policy: Omnidirectional or Directionless?", *The Diplomat*. <<http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/thailands-post-coup-foreign-policy-omnidirectional-or-directionless/>>.
- Croissant, A. & Bünte, M (2011), *The Crisis of Democratic Governance in Southeast Asia*, New York City, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Economist Intelligence Unit (2015), *Prospects and challenges on China's 'one belt, one road': a risk assessment report*.

- Goh, Brenda and Simon Webb. (2016, June 4), “On southwestern fringe, China’s Silk Road ambitions face obstacles”, *Reuters*. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-infrastructure-asean-insight-idUSKCN0YR010>>.
- Hart, Michael. (2020, October 2020), “East Coast Rail Link: Full Steam Ahead for China’s Belt and Road in Malaysia”, *Geopolitical Monitor*. <<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/east-coast-rail-link-full-steam-ahead-for-chinas-belt-and-road-in-malaysi>>.
- Hornby, Lucy. (2018, August 20), “Mahathir Mohamad warns against ‘new colonialism’ during China visit”, *Financial Times*. <<https://www.ft.com/content/7566599e-a443-11e8-8ecf-a7ae1beff35b>>.
- Hsueh, Chien-Wu (2020), “Zhong Guo Yi Dai Yi Lu Zai Di Yi Ge Wu Nian De Jin Zhan Yu Ying Xiang 2013-2018 [The Progress and Influence of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (2013-2018)]”, *Prospect Quarterly*, No. 21, pp.1-54.
- Huntington, Samuel P, (1991) “Democracy’s Third Wave”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2(2), pp. 12-34.
- Koya Jibiki. (2020, June 8), “Indonesia woos Japan as China-led high-speed-rail project stalls”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Transportation/Indonesia-woos-Japan-as-China-led-high-speed-rail-project-stalls>>.
- Kynge, James, Leila Haddou and Michael Peel. (2016, September 9), “FT Investigation: How China bought its way into Cambodia”, *Financial Times*. <<https://www.ft.com/content/23968248-43a0-11e6-b22f-79eb4891c97d#axzz4KLFb6uon>>.
- Lee, Poh Ping (2016), “Malaysia in 2015. A Denouement of sorts for the Prime Minister”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 101-107.
- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A. Way (2006), “Linkage versus Leverage: Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 379-400.
- Liu, Zhen. (2020, April 23), “Thailand puts Chinese submarine order on hold to fund coronavirus fight”, *South China Morning Post*. <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3081308/thailand-puts-chinese-submarine-order-hold-fund-coronavirus>>.
- Maulia, Erwida and Shotaro Tani (2019, April 10), “Widodo’s infrastructure push – election advantage or drag?”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Widodo-s-infrastructure-push-election-advantage-or-drag>>.

- Nanuam, Wassana (2019, January 14), “Army Seeks Approval for More VT4 Tanks”, *Bangkok Post*. <<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1610530/army-seeks-approval-for-more-vt4-tanks>>.
- Nathan, Andrew (2015), “The Authoritarian Resurgence: China’s Challenge”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 156-170.
- Nikkei Asia. (2021, May 20), “Cambodia’s Hun Sen: ‘If I don’t rely on China, who will I rely on?’”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2021/Cambodia-s-Hun-Sen-If-I-don-t-rely-on-China-who-will-I-rely-on>>.
- Parameswaran, Prashanth. (2016, March 1), “Is Malaysia Sliding Toward Dictatorship? A look at how the rhetoric compares to reality”, *The Diplomat*. <<http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/is-malaysia-sliding-toward-dictatorship/>>.
- Parameswaran, Prashanth. (2019, September 23), “China-Thailand Submarine Deal in the Headlines with Keel-Laying Ceremony”, *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/china-thailand-submarine-deal-in-the-headlines-with-keel-laying-ceremony/>>.
- Rainsy, Sam. (2020, June 10), “China Has Designs on Democracy in Southeast Asia.” *Foreign Affairs*. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-10/china-has-designs-democracy-southeast-asia>>
- Reilly, Benjamin (2013), “Southeast Asia: In the Shadow of China”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 156-164.
- Reuters, (2020, June 22), “Cambodia PM Says Ruling Party to Dominate for Up to 100 Years”, *Bangkok post*. <<https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1939104/cambodia-pm-says-ruling-party-to-dominate-for-up-to-100-years>>.
- Rim, Sokvy. (2022, July 5), “The Social Costs of Chinese Transnational Crime in Sihanoukville”, *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-social-costs-of-chinese-transnational-crime-in-sihanoukville/>>.
- Risse, Thomas and Nrlli Babayan (2015), “Democracy Promotion and the Challenges of Illiberal Regional Powers: Introduction to the Special Issue”, *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 381-399.
- Sangwongwanich, Pathom. (2016, September 15), “Sino-Thai rail project put back on track”, *Bangkok Post*. <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/1086276/sino-thai-rail-project-put-back-on-track>>.
- Schuman, Michael. (2015, November 25), “China’s New Silk Road Dream”,

- Bloomberg*. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-11-25/china-s-new-silk-road-dream>>.
- Silaen, Linda. (2018, April 16), “Indonesia, China Signs US\$23.3B Investment Agreement”, *The Insider Stories*. <<https://theinsiderstories.com/indonesia-china-signs-investment-agreement-us23-3b/>>.
- Siwage Dharma Negara and Tham Siew. (2020, October 19), “Have Chinese investments in Indonesian and Malaysian industrial estates brought long-term gains?”, *South China Morning Post*. <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3105892/have-chinese-investments-indonesian-and-malaysian-industrial>>.
- Slater, D. (2008). 3. Democracy and Dictatorship Do Not Float Freely: Structural Sources of Political Regimes in Southeast Asia. In E. Kuhonta, D. Slater & T. Vu (Ed.), *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (pp. 55-79). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Steil, Benn and Benjamin Della Rocca. (2019, May 8), “Belt and Road Tracker”, *Council on Foreign Relations*. <<https://www.cfr.org/article/belt-and-road-tracker>>.
- Suzuki, Jun and Hiroshi Kotani. (2017, February 15), “Indonesian high-speed rail project stalls, waiting on land”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Indonesian-high-speed-rail-project-stalls-waiting-on-land>>.
- Takashi Nakano. (2020, June 25), “Malaysia Drops Najib-era Graft Cases Spearheaded by Mahathir”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Malaysia-in-transition/Malaysia-drops-Najib-era-graft-cases-spearheaded-by-Mahathir>>.
- Tansey, Oisín (2016), “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion”, *Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 141-163.
- The Jakarta Post. (2019, March 20), “Indonesia to Propose Projects Worth US\$91 Billion for China’s Belt and Road”, *The Straits Times*. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-to-propose-projects-worth-us91-billion-for-chinas-belt-and-road>>.
- Thodsapol, Hongtong (2019, November 23), “Bangkok-Korat Railway May Be Paid for In Dollars”, *Bangkok Post*. <<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1800504/bangkok-korat-railway-may-be-paid-for-in-dollars>>.
- Tiezzi, Shannon. (2015, October 1), “It’s Official: China, Not Japan, Is Building Indonesia’s First High-Speed Railway”, *The Diplomat*. <<https://>

- thediplomat.com/2015/10/its-official-china-not-japan-is-building-indonesias-first-high-speed-railway/>.
- Tiezzi, Shannon. (2015, December 4), “China, Thailand Sign Rail, Rice, and Rubber Deals”, *The Diplomat*. <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-thailand-sign-rail-rice-and-rubber-deals/>>.
- Tomiyama, Atsushi. (2016, July 5), “Cambodia’s China Reliance Has Political, Diplomatic Consequences”, *Nikkei Asia*. <<http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Cambodia-s-China-reliance-has-political-diplomatic-consequences>>.
- Venkat, P.R. and Rick Carew. (2015, November 23), “Malaysia’s 1MDB to Sell Energy Assets to China Nuclear Firm”, *The Wall Street Journal*. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/malaysias-1mdb-to-sell-energy-assets-to-china-nuclear-firm-1448280084>>.
- Wahyudi, Soeriaatmadja. (2019, April 25), “Indonesia Wants BRI Projects to be in Line with National Development Plan, No Government Debt”, *The Straits Times*. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-wants-bri-projects-to-be-in-line-with-national-development-plan-no-government>>.
- Wright, Tom and Bradley Hope (2018), *Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood, and the World*, New York City, New York, Hachette Books.
- Wu, Shang Su. (2016, June 17), “Singapore-Kumming Rail Link: A ‘Belt and Road’ Case Study”, *The Diplomat*. <<http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/singapore-kunming-rail-link-a-belt-and-road-case-study/>>.
- Xinhua Net. (2020, November 8), “Key continuous beam closed in Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway”, *Xinhua Net*. <[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/08/c\\_139501225.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/08/c_139501225.htm)>.
- Yakouchyk, Katsiaryna (2019), “Beyond Autocracy Promotion: A Review”, *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 147-160.
- Yulisman, Linda. (2020, January 9), “Jokowi visits Natuna Islands as stand-off with China continues”, *The Straits Times*. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jokowi-visits-natuna-islands-as-stand-off-with-china-continues>>.
- Zhou, Jiayi, Karl Hallding, and Guoyi Han. (2015, June 15), “The Trouble with China’s ‘One Belt One Road’ Strategy”, *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/the-trouble-with-the-chinese-marshall-plan-strategy/>>