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China

What might One Belt, One Road mean for people in China?

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While OBOR is an outbound development strategy that is expected to significantly expand China's political and economic reach overseas, it also potentially has significant domestic implications. On the one hand, as highlighted above, OBOR is in part intended to solve domestic problems such as overcapacity issues, while on the other hand it should result in profits flowing back to China from overseas investments made by Chinese companies. Along with additional trade opportunities and investments made in China, according to some narratives of development, this should also contribute to improving prosperity domestically. Indeed OBOR is also intended to support the development and reform of all provinces and regions within China [1], with different provinces and regions intended to have different functions within the plan and many also passing their own development plans in relation to this.

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In this respect, Xinjiang and Fujian have been considered 'core areas' due to their geographical locations. Xinjiang is seen as a "window westward" to Central, South and West Asian countries and is expected to become financial hub for Western China, while Fujian is important for the maritime Silk Road and will focus on further development of logistics, shipping and marine sectors. The Western regions of Chongqing, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Xinjiang and Yunnan will also focus on infrastructure and urbanization projects and expanding international trade opportunities. Meanwhile Gansu, Ningxia and Xinjiang have a role in relation to their good natural and agricultural resources. In the Eastern coastal provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang new opportunities are expected to be seen in more advanced sectors such as financial and professional services, shipping and logistics, advanced manufacturing, e-commerce, healthcare and life sciences [3].

With China internally suffering from significant uneven development, however, parts of the OBOR project seem intended to advance development in less developed regions. Such objectives are also important considering the CCP's domestic concern with its legitimacy and social stability, something which partially relies on maintaining steady economic growth rates and the employment situation, areas which have come under strain in recent years as the economy slows down.

Xinjiang is one such underdeveloped region where, as described above, considerable weight is given in official plans for OBOR and the CPEC to the potential economic benefits that these initiatives might bring. Xinjiang is also a region which has seen a lot of unrest due to the Chinese government's suppression of the Uyghur population, and which has seen the resettlement of large number of migrants from throughout China to Xinjiang as part of a policy of pacification. In this respect a report on OBOR and the likely impacts in Xinjiang by the Uyghur Human Rights Project notes how earlier centrally driven development projects, which have encouraged the buildup of infrastructure, investment and migration such as Open up the Northwest (1992), Western Development (2000), and the Xinjiang Work Forums of 2010 and 2014, have done little to improve the economic situation of Uyghurs and have instead contributed to further displacement, while Uyghurs lack rights to participate in the development process. Following this, the report considers OBOR a continuation of previous state approaches to development, which will curb cultural identity, exacerbate tensions relating to assimilation and marginalization, while OBOR investments will not lead to equitable disbursement benefits to Uyghurs [4]. It also cites the analysis of Michael Clarke, an academic who has researched Xinjiang and China's Rise, when he states that:

"the intensification of Uyghur and Tibetan opposition to ongoing Chinese rule since 2008 has underlined for Beijing the need to accelerate the economic development/modernization of these regions as the primary means of achieving their integration into the modern Chinese state [5]."

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Although OBOR is a comparatively new initiative and impacts are as yet difficult to fully judge, given the past experience of the consequences of China's development over recent decades, equitable distribution and genuine meaningful benefits of OBOR for many people across China are also perhaps very doubtful. Whereas prior to the 1980s inequality levels were very low, in the period since China commenced with market reform, economic inequality in China has grown substantially, such that it now ranks amongst the highest levels in the world. While estimates vary, and the Chinese government has stopped releasing official figures since 2000, some have assessed China's Gini Coefficient as reaching 0.73 or higher by 2012, and that the richest 1% held more than a third of the nation's wealth.

Meanwhile environmental destruction and pollution have also become a major problem as China has pursued rapid growth and development, and this is something which has also had an adverse impact on human health. Air pollution is just one example, with toxic smogs becoming a common occurrence across many major cities, particularly in the north of China, as a result of increased coal burning and industrial and vehicle emissions. Smog has become so serious that research by Nanjing University's School of the Environment published in 2016 found that smog was responsible for a third of deaths in China [6]. Meanwhile more than 60% of China's underground water is reported to be polluted, with a lot of water sources contaminated by industrial waste and chemicals. According to Greenpeace, 320 million people in China do not have access to clean water [7].

With the Chinese government showing no signs of breaking away from the trajectories that have fueled this in the near future, and with OBOR only representing an outbound expansion, at the same time that OBOR investments overseas can be expected to further ecological harm and have negative impacts on ordinary people internationally, domestically it is likely that OBOR also represents just another initiative which prioritizes profits for the elites and the strengthening of the Communist Party regime over meaningful improvements for ordinary people and the environment.

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[1] One Belt One Road: A role for UK companies in developing China's new initiative, China-Britain Business Council.

[2] One Belt One Road: A role for UK companies in developing China's new initiative, China-Britain Business Council.

[3] One Belt One Road: China-Britain Business Council and 2015 OBOR action plan. <http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/2...>

[4] End of the Road: One Belt, One Road and the Cumulative Economic Marginalization of the Uyghurs, Uyghur Human Rights Project, March 2017.

[5] Ibid p20 and Understanding China's Eurasian Pivot, Michael Clarke, 10th September 2015, The Diplomat: www.thediplomat.com/2015/09/underst...

[6] Smog linked to a third of deaths in China, study finds. Alice Yan. 22nd December 2016. South China Morning Post. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/soci...>

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[7] World Water Day: 10 facts you ought to know. Ma Tianjie. 22nd March 2013. Greenpeace. <http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/...>