

Richard T. Griffiths. *The Maritime Silk Road: China's Belt and Road at Sea.* Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2020. ISBN: 978-9-0823-8104-7. Pp. xxxiv, 196. Hardback \$38.78; paperback \$18.86; e-book \$8.95.

With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the centrepiece of China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, a wide variety of publications emerged that saw the BRI as evidence for China's ambitions for world supremacy. As nauseating as this sort of studies are for their presumed evidencing of such global ambitions on the part of China, it is equally reinvigorating to encounter works such as the present one. Herein, Richard T. Griffiths, Professor emeritus in International Studies at the Centre for Innovation of Leiden University and affiliated with the university's International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), provides a rare level of deep insight into the world of seaborne trade and shipping, while explaining how the Maritime Silk Road ought to be understood within this context.

Following on from his earlier work, *Revitalising the Silk Road*,¹ this study is an investigation of the maritime component of China's BRI. The book's introduction and first chapter contain a discussion of the different areas through which the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) runs. These chapters explore how the long-standing (territorial) disputes and their mutually reinforcing suspicions in Asia reject China's dream of a 'harmonious, cooperative zone of co-prosperity' (p. 12). It is to Griffiths' merit that the BRI's ambitious pipedreams are continuously examined against the hard reality, particularly at sea. Whereas Griffiths initially repeats many of the elements that can be found in previous works within this genre, he also notes the book's departure away from 'the standard treatment of the MSR as a policy initiative to be squeezed into preconceived political science/strategic studies frameworks' (p. xxx).

An example is the narrative surrounding the Ming explorer Zheng He. It is in this historical figure's image that the contemporary Chinese party-state presumably seeks to revive its ancient tributary system (pp. 2-6). In the face of such renewed prowess as the world's pre-eminent power (p. 6), resistance would indeed be futile. Here, the author's sharp analytical light, revealing for the rest of the book, shines through in the reflective units which reject many of these tropes. Perception of the MSR as the vehicle for China's national government to transform the world is a similar 'dead-end,' Griffiths contends, since 'infrastructure and trade are not intellectual constructs but an accumulation of actions made by numerous actors – buyers and sellers of goods, on-land and seaborne transporters, port owners and administrators, as well as governments [which] do not act in isolation of global market forces and [are] rarely to sole influence on

¹ Richard T. Griffiths, *Revitalising the Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Leiden: HIPE Publications, 2017).

them' (p. xxx).

This point is underlined most explicitly by Griffiths' brief but striking note on his exclusion of any arguments that seek to connect the world of maritime trade with that of 'defence strategies and naval build-ups' (p. xxxiv). As the author rightfully notes, such approaches created an imbalance in the debate on the MSR, and on the BRI more generally (p. xxxiv). Moving the MSR beyond a China-centric story (p. xxxiv), or indeed an idiosyncratic one central to Xi Jinping's foreign policy, Griffiths commences Chapter 2 with a note on the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 rather than 2013 (when Xi Jinping inaugurated the maritime arm of the BRI; p. 35; 46). Taken together, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 respectively deal with the sectors of dry bulk, liquid bulk, and cars and containers. This impressive contextualisation positions the MSR within the world of maritime trade, and explains how the GFC contributed to China's ability to make headway within this industry (p. 45). Griffiths' critique of an influential report published by the Financial Times in 2017² illustrates how evidence can be wrongfully and tendentiously presented as proof of China's global ambitions (p. 176).³

To reset the debate, the book poses a fundamental question: 'Do Chinese port operators and shippers deviate from the general pattern for the industry?' (p. 33). In other words, as Chapter 6 notes: '[Is there] a discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality of China and the MSR?' (p. 176). China's present inability to shape either the maritime trading environment alone, or the position of the other major players around it suggests that the return of the ancient empire is nothing more than a misplaced fear and, indeed, mere 'intellectual posturing' (p. xxx). Instead, a picture of the MSR emerges that is less the result of Chinese overbearing prowess but rather, more simply, one of market forces. As such, this work is crucial for two reasons: firstly, for taking the BRI away from abstract notions, or those 'metaphysical constructs' that see China building a new tool for world supremacy (p. xxx), but, secondly, for also noting that the MSR is not only shaping but being shaped by the industry itself and the wider world around it.

The argument that China in all its ability to build infrastructure cannot just create a new world order out of thin air should not come as a surprise to many, yet it is one that is often repeated in studies of China's rise. Perhaps one of the biggest flaws within this debate is a perception of an 'omnipotent' Chinese party-state (or national government) whose

² James Kynge, Chris Campbell, Amy Kazmin & Farhan Bokhari, 'How China Rules the Waves', *Financial Times*, 12 January 2017, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/china-ports/>

³ Indeed, whilst state-owned companies reveal much about the relationship between party-state, government, and business in China; it should not be conflated with direct state control. See Shahar Hameiri & Lee Jones, 'Rising Powers and State Transformation: The Case of China', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 1. (2016), pp. 72-98.

targets 'seem powerless to resist' (p. xxvii). Much of the literature on the BRI is no different, with many seeing the initiative as an expression of China's geopolitical, geo-economic, or even geostrategic ambitions (pp. xxviii, 2). Instead, one could argue that the causes behind the BRI's creation, and the purposes it serves, are rather more mundane. At the same time, the book brilliantly rejects the notion of the BRI's 'emptiness,' an element often seen as proof for China's long-term strategising since it allows for elements to be added over the course of its development.

Located somewhere in the middle between two extremes, Griffiths' argument describes the BRI as 'having little to do either with the high ground of geostrategic and geopolitical concerns espoused by some parties or with the improvements of trade and shipping that the initiative is supposed to promote' (p. 2). Indeed, depending on the region, the BRI is clearly about much more than infrastructure but also about easier access to export markets (p. 26). Analysing the actual size of China's maritime strength (p. 177-178), Griffiths notes that it is not so much China's 'exceptional maritime trading development' but rather the USA's 'underdevelopment' that contributes to that exaggerated fear behind the BRI. The real challenges for seaborne trade and shipping are not so much a Chinese takeover, but issue resulting from externalities such as the destruction of the maritime environment and overfishing, shipwrecks and other accidents at sea, piracy, and abuse of crews (p. 180-182).

This worthy book presents the MSR as an actual construct outside the unsubstantiated announcements of a global takeover by China one often sees in similar studies. Scrutinising the BRI much more clearly, Griffiths' is a practical study of the BRI's maritime component, which grounds the initiative firmly within the industry of seaborne trade and shipping. It is also a welcome recalibration (p. xxxiv) of a debate in which flawed assumptions easily (and logically) can result in outrageous claims about China's rise and the BRI. The author, as is written in the book's introduction, can be more than pleased for doing so.

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