Interview – Benjamin Barton

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Dr Benjamin Barton is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations (PHIR) at the University of Nottingham's Malaysia Campus. Dr Barton graduated in 2016 from a joint-PhD programme between King's College London (War Studies Department) and Hong Kong University. Prior to undertaking his doctoral degree, Dr Barton was a Research Assistant for the College of Europe's Chair of EU-China Relations, as well as a Teaching Assistant for the College of Europe's Department of EU International Relations & Diplomacy Studies. In parallel to pursuing his doctoral research project, Dr Barton accumulated more than three years experience working as a Project Manager for consultancies in Brussels and Paris specialised in putting together proposals and managing projects emanating from EU-funded research grants. Dr Barton's research focuses on Chinese foreign policy, particularly Chinese economic statecraft (as expressed via the Belt-and-Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road), Chinese security policy (pertaining to its relations to the African continent, South Asia and Central Asia) as well as its bilateral relations with the European Union.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Obviously, given the times we live in, it's hard not to account for the changes brought upon by Covid on international politics and the seemingly intractable way in which the pandemic has exposed many of the flaws and cracks of (global) society which we knew existed but are now being exacerbated. Specifically in my field, I'm paying particular attention to four evolving debates: a) the short-term evolution of the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). I'm particularly interested in the role being played by local actors within 'recipient' BRI states in determining the fate of the Initiative (mainly in Africa) as well as the balancing attempts by Western countries/actors to forge some semblance of a rival initiative (in the shape of the 'B3W'); b) the evolving relationship between China and its various international interlocutors (namely the EU, EU member states and African actors too) during the pandemic and the general orientation of current Chinese foreign policy-making against the backdrop of its pursuit of global power status; c) China's attempts to play a more influential role on matters of peace and security on the African continent; d) the EU's incremental attempts at shifting its value-heavy foreign policy towards one better calibrated towards geopolitical considerations.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I would suppose that from my time as a budding master's student up until today, I've become far more sceptical, particularly in terms of my perception of China's role in the world. Back in 2009 and from the period up until Xi became President, I took a more optimistic view of China's potential role in the world, its ability to bring constructive change and in terms of the potential of its bilateral relations with the EU. Given China's trajectory since, I find myself joining a chorale of scholars who see China's international intent with far more cynicism than I ever used to. I do nevertheless maintain the need for scholarly balance. It's very easy to get carried away by Manichean narratives and counter-narratives regarding China. Too much commentary and some scholarly outputs on China just feed into the hype, discarding the need for nuance and end up contributing to what is fast becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Within the circle of scholars I know of personally who have influenced my thinking on China and EU-China relations, my former doctoral supervisors (Dr Alessio Patalano, KCL and Dr Roland Vogt, HKU) as well as Dr Scott AW Brown (University of Dundee) and Dr Anna Stahl (Jacques Delors Centre) have all played key roles in helping to sharpen my analytical focus over the years. Beyond my immediate network, there is so much to choose from, but I've always been inspired by the works of late Prof. Ian Taylor on China-Africa relations, Prof. John W. Garver on the history of Chinese foreign policy, Prof. Yan Xuetong for a Chinese perspective on IR. These are just a handful among an ever-expanding pool of China experts.

How does the BRI advance China's security interests in Africa? Is this a point of contention between China and its counterparts, particularly the US and India?

For now, the association between the BRI and China's security interests in Africa remains quite a loose one, with the exception of the Djibouti base (below). This is because BRI projects are still being rolled out for strictly commercial purposes, mostly by actors (at least on the Chinese side, such as State-Owned Enterprises, Policy Banks, etc.) who are driven by their bottom lines first and foremost. They are not so much driven, contrary to popular assumptions, by the desire for exploiting the commercial and legal structures of BRI deals for the purpose of political and/or strategic leverage. Underpinning this assumption is the belief that because the majority of Chinese actors involved with the BRI are "state-owned," their commercial strategies somehow feed back into broader government strategies, such as the PRC's general security interests pertaining to Africa. This link has yet to be systematically proven in the extant literature.

This being said, various dimensions of China's security profile in Africa (fighting non-traditional security threats; contributing to peace, stability and state resilience; the protection of its overseas nationals and business interests) are obviously inexorably tied to the evolution of the BRI in Africa and vice versa. For instance, it has been recognised in the literature that the Djibouti base (opened in 2017) serves multiple purposes, one of which relates to the protection of BRI and MSRI projects. In the case of the Doraleh Multipurpose Port (Djibouti) – a flagship MSRI project – one of the births has been reserved for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). There has also been talk in the literature of more commercial MSRI ports potentially being used by the PLAN in the future whether for rest, replenishment, repairs or, in more extreme circumstances, warfare. Since Africa has mostly experienced the rollout of the BRI in the shape of port construction, upgrading or renovation projects (Djibouti, Lamu, Walvis Bay), these ports obviously fall into this consideration in terms of their potential for military use. The more MSRI port projects are rolled out across Africa's coastline, the more we can expect speculation, discussion and analysis to be ramped up. Incidentally, the more BRI projects there are in Africa (despite scepticism in policy and academic circles about this trend), the more there will be a need for the Chinese government to increase its security presence on the continent in order to ensure the protection of its nationals, companies and investments. This is especially true given the track record Chinese infrastructure actors have when it comes to investing in some of the most volatile parts of the continent – parts where Beijing cannot always rely on local actors to ensure the safety of its nationals. We have already seen attempts to mitigate this trend, partially, with Chinese security contractors being tendered to protect BRI sites. So, in theory, the BRI could precipitate a greater role for Chinese security actors (whether state-led or private). This is however contingent on BRI investments maintaining their current pace in Africa and, more importantly, on the reception of host governments in Africa to the idea of a stronger Chinese security presence.

Obviously, the BRI has quite clearly been earmarked as a point of contention between China and a number of other parties (US, EU, India), in general terms, for a host of reasons ("debt-traps;" the lack of transparency of BRI deals; the negative environmental/social impacts; the underlying suspicions about the BRI's strategic motives). The security dimension of the BRI has not yet identified as one of these key concerns. Nevertheless, it is obvious that if the BRI does facilitate a growing Chinese influence in the African security realm (again the empirical evidence is still pending here) which subsequently impinges on the objectives of the US (and to a much lesser extent India), this will only serve to further enflame an already tense situation. In any case the US, India and others (France, the UK, the EU, Japan) have to recognise that China's re-emergence in Africa over the past two decades has allowed it to become one of, if not the, most influential external party on the continent (especially amongst the ruling elite). So anything which only serves to consolidate that will be seen negatively by China's rivals whether in the wider scope of global balancing and counter-balancing or in terms of the US and India's own respective interests in Africa (regardless of whether China's true intentions regarding peace and security in Africa are nefarious or not). I would again reiterate though that for all the hype about these rivalries flowing over into the continent's politics, ultimately it is the agency of African leaders (and to a much lesser extent African civil society) which will determine the nature of interaction between actors such as the PRC, the US and India in Africa.

You have written about China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the subsequent security/economic nexus in the Indian Ocean Region. How will this initiative by China affect the Sino-Indian relationship?

From my observations, the China-India relationship has always been one juxtaposing rivalry (at times spilling over into outright conflict as seen in 1962, 2017 and 2020) with the potential that China-India rapprochement could have in terms of being able to bring change to the order and structure of international relations. In a way, Sino-Indian relations still live under the shadow of Zhou Enlai upstaging Nehru at the Bandung Conference (1955) and Mao Zedong's mistrust of Nehru's vision of the Sino-Indian border (and Sino-Indian relations at large). Fast-forwarding four decades, it would seem that this state of affairs continues to loom large over their bilateral relations. The MSRI has not helped to assuage this general sense of mistrust, particularly from India's vantage point. Even though MSRI projects are largely helping to fill a gap in the development and modernisation prospects of countries comprising the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) – contrary to the non-interference rhetoric promulgated by the Chinese government – they have usually come with some strings attached, at least as far as India is concerned. For instance, the MSRI triggered fears of "debt traps" and the political leveraging of this for broader geopolitical reasons (such as facilitating and normalising the presence of the PLAN at MSRI ports across the IOR, leading to a contestation of India's regional hegemony). Furthermore, the MSRI has sporadically allowed for Chinese influence to interfere in the domestic politics of IOR states, sometimes at the expense of India's interests. When Mahindra Rajapakse ran for reelection in 2014, a part of his reelection campaign revolved around wooing constituents in his home district of Hambantota. Coincidentally, Hambantota would become home to two white elephant MSRI projects (the international airport and port). The thinking was that these projects would serve as a catalyst for Rajapakse's reelection. The former Prime Minister was known to have forged strong ties under his watch both with Chinese infrastructure actors as well as between Sri Lanka and the PRC, to the extent where Sri Lanka took decisions which contravened the spirit of its bilateral relations with India (e.g. by allowing PLAN submarines to dock in Sri Lankan ports without any forewarning to India). Whether this consequence of the BRI is intended or not, the spillover effect it can trigger from domestic political considerations into a regional setting obviously has significance for external parties unassociated to it. I would believe that this is one of the unofficial reasons why India has yet to officially recognise the BRI, despite the appeal of the prospects of Chinese infrastructure investments in India.

A lot has been said about the BRI's supposedly underlying strategic effects. Although this aspect should not be overlooked, the BRI does not exist in a vacuum. In the IOR's case, I see three reasons to believe that the risk of political spillover will be mitigated: a) the democratic nature of countries in the IOR means that there will always be some form of public scrutiny over BRI projects which is likely to check China's attempts to utilise these projects for strategic purposes (e.g. in 2015 Maithripala Sirisena was elected in Sri Lanka to succeed Rajapakse partly on the basis of a strong stance on China); b) India's own activism in the region: India may not have the resources of the BRI and has not always lived up to its promises to its neighbouring countries, but its wherewithal and determination to maintain its regional hegemony should not be underestimated; c) the role of external parties (US, Japan, Australia, EU, etc.), whether in proposing a direct alternative to the BRI and/or in supporting IOR states with capacity-building measures to better allow them to navigate the politics of infrastructure financing. In sum, the MSRI clearly has impacted Sino-Indian relations, most probably for the worse, but I think New Delhi has come to recognise what needs to be done to mitigate any potential strategic threat in this regard.

Does the BRI represent a paradigm shift in EU-China cooperation?

Thus far, the BRI has been much talked about in the scope of the EU and China's bilateral relations but – as often in the world of Sino-EU relations – nothing much has actually happened. The principle reason for this is, like India, the EU remains one of the few actors in the world to not have officially signed up to the BRI. Oddly – and in typical EU fashion – some of its member states have (e.g. Hungary, Italy). The EU and China did launch a joint 'Connectivity Platform' back in 2015 in the spirit of the BRI, which acts as a quasi-clearing house for joint infrastructure projects in and around the Silk Roads. Yet, realistically and in accordance with the general tone of bilateral relations, the EU and China stand at opposing ends of the spectrum when it comes to infrastructure financing and construction. Generally-speaking, this is largely the result of the EU supporting a market-oriented vision of awarding infrastructure contracts, where the winning consortium is required to respect a number of factors (sustainability, environmental and social impact assessment, etc.) as opposed to the state-led and purported no-strings-attached model promulgated by China. These factors are reflected in the EU's infrastructure blueprint, the "Connecting Europe and Asia: Building Blocks for an EU Strategy paper." In fact, these same factors were the cause of embarrassment during the 2017 BRI Forum when the EU collectively rejected the BRI Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) prepared by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce on the grounds that the MoU did not sufficiently respect them. To make matters worse, China has been relatively active in pushing the "17+1" framework which is meant to further promote the BRI in the scope of a forum dedicated to China's relations with countries from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, many of whom are either EU member states or have candidate country status (but does not involve the EU per se). Beijing has attempted to dismiss the threat, as pointed out by many analysts, of the "17+1" framework working to undermine European integration. At the time of writing, it would appear that the greatest threat to the "17+1" is rather its seeming inability to generate outputs as well as its members' own doubts about its viability (as recently expressed through Latvia's decision to revoke its membership). All in all, for as much as the BRI has generated further bilateral statements between China and the EU on the prospect of synergising their efforts and policy priorities around the roll out of the BRI across the Global South, the BRI certainly cannot be tagged as a "paradigm shift" for EU-China cooperation.

What policies should the EU adopt in response to the BRI, particularly in Africa?

With the launch of the B3W initiative, the EU now appears to stand in the "camp" opposing the BRI, instead devising its own modus operandi. As BRI experts have already pointed out, this response probably comes too little, too late. In any case, the B3W will not be able to rival the BRI on its own terms, since it cannot offer the BRI's "complete package" (i.e., financing, infrastructure expertise, cheap and qualified labour, fast completion time, etc.). I do believe that the BRI needs some form of competition as its virtual monopoly over infrastructure financing and construction in the Global South is beneficial for no one, especially when filling the infrastructure financing and construction void represents a global public good of sorts. However, seeking to outmuscle the Chinese on a turf where Chinese companies and policy banks have developed a real comparative advantage over the past two decades (at a time when industrialised countries began dialing back on public funding for large-scale infrastructure projects in developing economies) comes across as counter-intuitive. Instead, the EU should seek to play to its strengths. After all, the EU has a long-standing history when it comes to providing development aid and assistance to the Global South (and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa) stretching back almost six decades.

Since China has been re-emerging on the African continent (around the beginning of the 21st century), EU scholars (such as Maurizio Carbone or Uwe Wissenbach) have been calling on Brussels to tweak its approach to providing development assistance in order to allow the EU to better adapt to the new reality where the Chinese model (as seen in the field of infrastructure) is jeopardising EU development interests. This does not call for an overhaul but rather a subtle revision of its approach devised around the following suggested policy alterations: a) being more in tune with local wants and needs – since development has to be internally driven, Brussels should strive to show greater flexibility (at times) to its relatively dogmatic take on development governance. As mentioned above, this should not entail abandoning its modus operandi but instead affording itself the leeway to being competitive and innovative, so as to not suffer from its own approach being undercut by more appealing models, such as the so-called "Beijing Consensus;" b) place the emphasis on capacity-building and knowledge exchange when it comes to the financing and construction of infrastructure amongst different echelons of local political and administrative decision-making chains of command in Africa. What has become quite noticeable under the initiatives of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is Beijing's desire to win the hearts and minds of future leaders (whether political, military, commercial, media) across the continent. If the EU is serious about promoting its alternative vision of infrastructure financing as well as the norms underpinning it, it should also seek to promote awareness of the virtues of its "model" as well as the risks inherent to the BRI "model." Without transferring such knowledge and know-how, simply throwing the prospect of potential financing as a solution to the BRI "problem" is unlikely to generate a sustainable mechanism with which the EU can promote its own brand of infrastructure assistance; c) where possible and feasible, the EU should encourage China and Chinese infrastructure actors to abide by the highest international standards in terms of compliance with norms for debt sustainability.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic and the economic ripple effects triggered thereafter, the debate on Africa's outstanding debt has resurfaced in a major way. This is naturally a complex debate given the multiplicity of actors involved, their variegated interests in addition to the general secrecy of the terms of debt repayment. Both the EU and China are important stakeholders in this regard, regardless of whether their various forms of assistance have been channeled through multilateral banks, commercial banks or through bilateral mechanisms. Since the BRI has in some instances raised the alarm over debt sustainability in a number of African states, the EU should strongly encourage China to not only contribute towards a multilateral debt deal to grant economies in Africa more breathing space in the short-term, but also lobby Beijing to ensure that the financial terms of any BRI deal complies with international customs and standards (particularly regarding transparency). One way of achieving this could be to invite China to become a member of the Paris Club or, more realistically, invite the PRC to consider jointly establishing a "Paris Club 2.0" on terms of reference which the leadership in Beijing might consider feasible. As the above would suggest, there is much work to be done.

What are the major challenges to EU-China cooperation and which collaborative avenues and developments are you optimistic about?

When tallying the major challenges facing EU-China relations against viable avenues for bilateral cooperation, naturally, the former clearly outweighs the latter in quantity. In itself, that is not a surprise and has been a constant throughout the history of EU-China relations. Perhaps the difference between the situation today and that of two decades ago is the apparently widening gap of mistrust which seems to have instilled itself at the highest levels of the relationship. Of course, the EU and China are still of utmost importance to one another, especially on matters of trade and investment as well as on other "sectoral" concerns. Yet, if we track back to 2003, at the height of the so-called "honeymoon period" when both parties announced their "Strategic Partnership," I'm quite certain few would have expected the foundations of the Strategic Partnership to collapse to the extent it seems to have fallen today. I would say that EU-China relations are faced with the four following core challenges: a) coping with relics from the past; b) value differences; c) geopolitics; d) the EU's ability to score own goals.

On point a), although they are not currently seen as hot topics, the EU's inability to lift the arms embargo on China (dating back to 1989) and its continued unwillingness to grant the PRC "Market Economy Status" (largely because of the macroeconomic risks involved) dented most of the hope China foresaw in the EU at the turn of the century. Maybe Chinese leaders believed too much of the hype stemming from the bilateral rhetoric at the time themselves, but they soon learnt that the EU could not and would not live up to its Strategic Partner billing. Individually, neither of these issues are as crucial nowadays as they were at the time (i.e., the arms embargo does not technically stop the sale of dual-use hardware from the EU to China) but the symbolism of their respective failures still rankles with Beijing. Since, both issues have been sporadically rekindled but to no avail, with no foreseeable change likely to occur here in the short term.

Most of the cause attributable to the failures of the arms embargo and MES finds their genesis in b): value differences. In 1990, Harish Kapur published a monograph entitled *Distant Neighbours: China and Europe*. I mention this here because that title is still very of much relevance three decades later. China is as much, if not more, authoritarian now than it was then, while the EU – despite its questionable record of upholding its title as a normative power both internally and externally – remains the epitome of a Western liberal (democratic) institution. No one should kid themselves: the EU and China stand at polar opposites on the spectrum of norms and principles. The worldview of (most of) their leaders contrasts diametrically and this reality has grown more obvious under President Xi's drive to counter liberalism and democracy worldwide. This macro reality continues to rear its head across virtually all of the issues covered under the aegis of EU-China relations and, most notably, over hot topics such as China's human rights record, Taiwan, Tibet and most recently Xinjiang. These fallouts can also trigger ripple effects too across other parts of the partnership, such as the backlash in the EU over Chinese sanctions on select Members of the European Parliament leading to a freeze to the never-ending talks over the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) – an impasse which only serves to further fuel bilateral resentment. This fallout has only been worsened by the pandemic as well as debates over the origins of the Covid-19 virus.

Bilateral trust is also hard to come by – this time seen from the lens of policymakers in China – due to the elephant in the room: the US. Transatlantic relations may blow hot and cold, as best illustrated under the dark days of the Trump administration, but they've largely withstood multiple tests of time. Chinese leaders have themselves made attempts to break these ties through the disbursement of various carrots and sticks, but transatlantic priorities and alignment have usually stood firm. The reality is that the EU cannot aspire to gain full independence over its foreign policy (especially towards China) for as long as it is subject to the security umbrella afforded to it by the US – a state of affairs unlikely to change any time soon. With President Biden assuming office, the attempts to multilaterally balance China have become more overt, with even NATO expected to play a part. Whether all of the EU's key leaders are comfortable with this strategy or not (I doubt there is wholesale support in Brussels and across member state capitals), the EU has already become roped into this global strategic contest and is expected to carry its share of the burden. If Chinese leaders had hoped or expected for the EU to mark its distances with the US in order to move closer to China and its vision of multipolar world order at the height of the "honeymoon period," then these leaders were either misguided or were seriously under the wrong impression. Paradoxically, this sentiment is echoed in a way to the expectation in the West during the 1990s that after economic prosperity, democracy would follow in China. I think the naivety has largely been put to bed on both sides now.

Lastly, China's inability to trust the EU as a reliable partner also stems from the EU's own inability to trust itself on the world stage, mostly because of the anachronistic nature of the unanimous decision-making structure undergirding its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This structure leaves the EU heavily exposed to the whims of a single or clutch of member states. The absence of decision-making flexibility here too often allows the EU to become hijacked by the individualistic preferences of its member states – some of whom often seek to court China, sometimes just out of apparent spite towards the EU (e.g., Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orban). At times, to me, it seems absurd that for all of the progress the EU has made over the decades both horizontally and vertically in policy and competence terms, that foreign policy remains one of the few outliers to member state sovereignty. In any case, since Beijing has proven itself very adept over time at conquering and dividing the EU by pressuring mostly "weaker" member states into serving as Trojan horses to unified EU positions on China (e.g. Hungary, Greece), the EU will continue to hamper its own ability to formulate a clear and coherent position on China – a position which, under the impulse over 27 member states, could make leaders in Beijing stand up and take notice.

As for areas of collaboration, my optimism in light of the above does not stretch far. In essence, there will always be room for some degree of bilateral cooperation, some predictable (e.g., the fight against nuclear proliferation) and some unexpected (e.g., the fight against Somali piracy in the Western Indian Ocean). Against the current bilateral backdrop, the prospects for cooperation would appear bleak. It is not unheard of though for cooperative behaviour to spring a surprise when it is least expected. For now, I would say the safest bets for bilateral cooperation rest in the field of the fight against climate change and in the fight against sporadic non-traditional security threats which might impede the smooth flow of goods and commodities between both sides (e.g., piracy in the Gulf of Guinea). I do sincerely wish, however, that my sceptical prognostic proves to be erroneous and that we soon enter a new era of prosperous Sino-EU relations.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

For those who aspire to a career in the field of social sciences (whether teaching or research), for all the struggles (whether personal or professional) you might have to endure in making your dream come true, never forget why you chose to make it in the first place. In other words, our duty as social scientists is to try (!) and make the world a better place, mostly by striving for debate over truth in facts – a noble process which certainly does not hold universal appeal. Given the cracks in (global) society currently being exposed by the pandemic as well as by society's growing dependence on technological development (with its own pros and cons), it is vital that critical reasoning and the pursuit of the rational truth continue to serve as key societal pillars. We are in the business of critical reasoning and that legacy needs to be handed down across generations. I know firsthand just how difficult it is to make it as a young IR scholar myself and others will undoubtedly face similar struggles in their bid to pursue this dream of achieving status within IR scholarship. My advice is, despite the struggle, never lose focus of that legacy.