

**Two Hegemonic Restructuring Projects in Diachronic Perspective:  
America's Marshall Plan (1948-1951) and  
China's Belt & Road Initiative (2013-)**

Conference at Columbia University  
November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018,

This one-day conference brings together scholars of International Relations and History from China, Europe, and the United States to examine the historical legacy and contemporary relevance of the US-led European Recovery Plan (Marshall Plan) of the 1940s and the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of the present day.

As the global and regional hegemons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century retreat from investing in development around the world, China marches on with the ambitious global program known as the Belt and Road Initiative. President Xi Jinping launched the BRI in 2013 to connect Eurasian economies through infrastructure, trade and investment. Extending to 68 countries or regions covering a vast area of Eurasia, including Western and Mediterranean and parts of Africa and Oceania, the BRI seeks to create the ports, roads and rail and telecommunications links for a modern-day Silk Road. The economic promises and perils of the BRI are still in the making, but its political message is obvious: China is attempting to establish a new model of global leadership in its own image.

The BRI is inevitably juxtaposed with the European Recovery Plan, which helped rebuild Western Europe after the Second World War. This conference starts by taking this juxtaposition seriously to review the ways in which nation-states have attempted to exercise global leadership since the 1940s. We suggest that it is important to understand the original goals of regional re-structuring in the wake of World War II, and to take seriously what nations outside of the West claimed, the USSR in the lead, that socialist planning models and Soviet aid, were specular to the Western capitalist intervention. We suggest, further, that it is not that there were no major development projects in the period between the Marshall Plan and the present, including, of course, IMF and World Bank Projects, initiatives coming out of the European Union, as well as leading European nations, notably the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic.

What sets apart the BRI from other redevelopment projects since the Marshall Plan is, however, its intensity and scope of investment and branding that merge economic investment and restructuring with strong cultural messaging to re-develop a non-Western-centric global system of communication, trade, and post-capitalist normative international relations. We also underscore its timing, that it has emerged following the end of a short but prolific post-Cold War period, 1990 to 2010 circa, in which multilateral diplomacy, networked communications, and international non-governmental organizations sought to give a new soft-power

order to international governance. We thus ask: Is the BRI a response to —or an outcome of — the failure of this multilateral liberal global order, which was concerned with expanding neo-liberal markets globally, and, as a support, democracy-building, communicating through cyber technology, and coalition-led (mostly on the part of the U.S.) regional wars and policing actions?

The goal of the conference is thus to offer a critical historical analysis of this new hegemonic project and the changing nature of building international influence from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. By comparing the BRI with the Marshall Plan, we renew the process of revising interpretations of the Marshall Plan moment, the last significant episode of which occurred in the 1990s, in the wake of the break-up of the USSR, as U.S. and European historians converged in terms of thinking about the European Recovery Plan as the first project of “global capitalist restructuring.”

Our goal is to have a frank and engaged conversation on the subject of historical and contemporary hegemonic restructuring. We hope that this conference will be the beginning of a sustained and long-term discussion among scholars of diverse nationalities and disciplines on the diachronic comparison of US- and Chinese-led regional restructuring projects of the past and the present, and more broadly of global economic transformations from the twentieth-century to today.

Charles Armstrong  
Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences  
Columbia University

Victoria de Grazia  
Moore Collegiate Professor of History  
Columbia University