Belt and Road Initiative through Post-Colonial Theory

Does China’s Belt and Road Initiative fit the post-colonial description of draining a developing state?

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Bachelor thesis, 15 credits
Department of Government, Uppsala University
Development studies, Spring 2022
Supervisor: Hans Blomkvist
Word count: 10,312
Title: *Belt and Road Initiative through Post-Colonial Theory*

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Abstract
This thesis examines the Chinese investment programme; the Belt and Road Initiative, through a post-colonial lens, to categorise whether it fits the postcolonial draining of emerging economies. The purpose of this research is to broaden the way we see post-colonial relationships and contribute to the notion that all advanced economies can have a draining relationship with emerging ones. This is done by examining the geographical and economical aspects of the BRI-projects in two states; Kenya and Sri Lanka, to detect draining. The thesis comes to the conclusion that China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, fits the post-colonial description of draining the examined states. The results hopefully mean a humble contribution to the broadening of what is included in the post-colonial theory.

**Key words:** Post-colonial theory, Belt and Road Initiative, Economic draining, Landgrabbing, Draining, Trade deficit

**List of Abbreviations:**
BRI: Belt and Road Initiative
IMF: The international Monetary Fund
IR: International Relations
MOU: Memorandum of understanding
PCT: Post Colonial Theory
SGR: Standard Gauge Railway
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1. Introduction

Post-colonial theory has been used for a long time to describe the draining relationship between Western former colonisers and the former colonies of the Global South. This research territory usually only concerns these types of relationships. This thesis pursues the need to look beyond this and direct focus to non-Western countries without a colonial legacy. The research subject is instead an economic superpower, that is not Western nor a former coloniser, China. To conduct a research on China’s possible post-colonial draining, this paper focuses on the niche of China’s biggest investment programme: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in two emerging economies. These are examined through Post-colonial Theory, (further referred to as PCT).

By defining two aspects of PCT and critically examining the BRI projects with them, we will determine whether China is joining in on the post-colonial drain or not. This type of research is relevant and important. Firstly, because PCT could be a very good tool for explaining these kinds of relationships, today, however, it is often limited to only former colonisers and former colonies. Hence, it is important to broaden the theory to keep pace with the development in the world. Secondly, this research is criticising a major investment programme from one of the world's biggest economies that will affect millions of people. It is important to nail down big investors and bring light to how their programmes actually affect local people.

2. Purpose and Research question

The purpose of this research is to broaden the way we see post-colonial relationships and contribute to the notion that all advanced economies can have a draining relationship with the emerging ones, not just those who have a former colonial relationship. To examine this research problem, we look closer at the case of China, a newly strong economy and foreign investor. The study is tapered into China’s specific investment programme “The Belt and Road Initiative” and delimited into two cases of investment, in Sri Lanka and Kenya. The thesis aims to examine the Chinese investment programme, the Belt and Road Initiative, through a post-colonial lense and categorise whether it fits in the same postcolonial draining of emerging economies that scholars accuse the West of (Hickel et al, 2021). This is done to highlight the fact that big economies take advantage of emerging economies, regardless of
whether they have been in a colonial relationship with them or not. The research question is as follows:

*Does China’s Belt and Road Initiative fit the post-colonial description of draining a developing state?*

This question seeks to evaluate and describe if and how the chosen investments of the BRI, through a post-colonial lense, takes on colonial characteristics and therefore fits the post-colonial description of draining another state. Hence, the research question is of descriptive character (Teorell & Svensson, 2016). The research is relevant since the international system is always changing and evolving and the theories need to be broadened to keep up. The way former colonisers have acted is not reserved for simply this category anymore and therefore there is a value in doing research that highlights this change to keep the theories relevant. The hope is that this paper will make a humble contribution to the brodening of the post-colonial concept and inspire more research on the issue of post-colonial draining from states that are not former colonies. It could also hopefully be used as evidence in critique of the imperialistic system.

The paper is constructed in the following way. First, the theoretical framework on PCT is presented along with the presenting of the aspects that will mainly be examined. Previous research on PCT is presented as well as a look at China through PCT and lastly some background on the Belt and Road Initiative. After that, the methodology is presented. Subsequently the results, analysis and discussion is conducted. Lastly, there is a conclusion of the results found, before a bibliography.

### 3. Theoretical framework and previous research

#### 3.1 Post-colonial Theory

Since there is no recognized global definition of PCT, all theoretical framework comes from previous research. The definition that this thesis will use is presented below, collected from various sources of previous research on the theory.
Post-colonial theory is an alternative IR theory that first emerged in the 1970's as a critique towards the continuance of European colonialism shaping the world (Jazeel, 2019). Colonialism, in its continuance and in this thesis, is not limited to the actual establishment of colonies, but rather refers to the imperialistic meaning of some sort of power exerted by one political power in the space of another state (Jazeel, 2019). The concept of “post” is much debated and contested (ibid; Eriksson et al, 2002; Hall, 1995). The interpretation used in this thesis is that “post” does not have to do with chronology, but rather the need to “look beyond” the structures of the West and criticise the world order (ibid). PCT seeks to explore and examine the ongoing colonial encounters in the world (Jazeel, 2019). Beyond the general critique of the global power hierarchies and relations, that exists in numerous international theories, PCT attempts to understand the global capital and power through aspects such as race, class and gender (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002; Nationalencyklopedin, 2022). Chowdhry and Nair write that the consideration of the overlap of these aspects with power, is the contribution of PCT to IR theory. In our thesis, class refers to the economic state of a country, and is assumed to be overlapping with the global power of a state. Thus, we are looking into how an economically strong state (China) can misuse their global power in the relationship with an economically weaker state (Kenya and Sri Lanka). To sum up, our definition regards the need to look beyond the structures and question the imperialistic power that one global superpower has over a weaker state. The “draining” that is looked for in this research can be defined as the more powerful state using their leverage to benefit, at the expense of the weaker state. This could be through unfair trade or deals, political pressure etc.

Jazeel (2019) writes that “Defining postcolonialism is a notoriously difficult task.”, hence this thesis does not aim to define the whole theory, but rather only the parts necessary for our research. Hall (1995) also discusses the difficulties in demarcating the theory and limiting what should be included. He asks questions like; Is the theory only applicable on former colonies of the periphery? Are all former colonies included? Is it the context of the world after colonisation and imperialism? He settles in the notion that there are different ways of using the theory in different contexts. To match our research purpose and question (section 2), this thesis will use the theory as a lens to criticise the structural hierarchies and the draining of a weaker state. Considering the size of the PCT, and the critique it often receives for being ambiguous and multiple (Hall, 1995, Eriksson et al, 2002), I have made the decision to disentangle and select only the aspects relevant to this research. The two aspects of PCT that this paper will mainly focus on are economical and geographical. These are most
relevant to provide evidence of post-colonial draining. In the following, I explain the theoretical framework and some previous research on these aspects in PCT.

There are critiques on the lack of economic aspects in PCT. Some scholars accuse it of being neglective of economic theories like Marxism and economic systems like capitalism and simply focusing on cultural aspects (Hall, 1995; Chowdhry & Nair, 2002). Claims have even been made that Western post-colonial scholars direct their attention away from the material inequalities and deprivation that is the aftermath of their global capitalist expansion (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002:22). However, the material inequalities between the global north and south very much belong in PCT. I find it important to illuminate this aspect since I believe that it is one of the more prominent ways to actually see post-colonial relationships today and therefore a good way to detect draining. Therefore, the first aspect of PCT that is further explained is the economical. The research purpose of this thesis is to evaluate/examine an economic investment program, therefore it is even more necessary to directly gaze at the economic aspect. Through Western domination of the market and assets, appropriated developing countries have slower economic development (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). The theoretical insights of PCT offers the explanation that the West has an “/…/calculated coordination of institutional interests to sustain Western capitalist hegemony in the global economy.” (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002:21). This means that PCT problematizes the Western dominans in global relations and capitalization of the Global South. There is previous research on the economic post-colonial relationships, mostly between European former colonisers and former African colonies. One specific is the article by Hickel et al (2021) on the subject of the post-colonial economic drain of the Global South. The article proves by different methods how the wealth of the global north is dependent on unequal exchange with the Global South. This appropriation was obvious during the colonial era, but is still very much true today as richer countries continue to rely on these unequal conditions to sustain their wealth (ibid). This economic hierarchy and draining of economically weaker states is what this thesis focuses on as the economical aspect of PCT. This can be seen in trade deficits, international companies or other states owning and making profits of domestic resources etc. Such an uneven economic relationship has to take place between one strong established economic state and one developing nation, thus significantly economically weaker. Hence, an uneven trade relation between two Western states does not fit the criteria.
The second aspect included is the geographical. A foundation in colonialism is the conquest and appropriation of land (Reinhard, 2011). This still occurs today, in other forms, often disguised as “investments”. Tzouvala explains how the West preys on unprotected land abroad when there is an opportunity to make money. Formerly it would primarily be in Asia, but now Africa is seen as the most fruitful continent (Tzouvala, 2019). This acquisition of the Global South is criticised as illegitimate and is called land-grabbing (ibid). Land grabbing is today’s form of geographical colonialism and a distinct way of detecting post-colonial draining of a state. Kariuki and Ng’etich (2016) describe land grabbing as the phenomenon of foreign governments or companies acquiring land in developing countries for opportunities to make money, e.g. by mining, infrastructural projects, oil exploration etc. This aspect is very much needed since China is investing and operating outside of their own territory with the BRI. The way they are acting and how mindful they are of that can tell us a lot about their respect for the host country’s sovereignty.

3.1.1 China in a Post-colonial light

Previous research on China and their relatively new interest in foreign investments exist. Following section will present some of it.

Although China is considered a developing country and a part of the Global South in older texts and research, it is today the world's second biggest economy (after the US) and can arguably not be called an emerging economy anymore. China did for a long time avoid foreign investments (CNBC international, 2019). However in recent years, in step with their own growing economy China has started looking outwards and investing in other emerging economies, especially on the African continent. In 2021, China had some sort of industrial investment in every country, except Swaziland, on the African Continent (Harris, 2021). These untapped resources are needed for China's continued growth. The projects in Africa have often had a good impact on the countries’ economies (ibid;Busse et al. 2016.) However, there are concerns that China’s presence inhibits the development in these countries, as China only wants raw materials (Busse et al. 2016) which leave no room for the African states to develop refining of the materials and make more money from their resources. This harnessing of raw materials in exchange for industrial investments is a way for China to keep making money on these emerging economies, often to the host-state's loss. This is a very clear
example of the kind of the uneven trade that creates the economic drain that Hickel et al (2021) discusses. The fact that China actually owns a lot of territory and natural resources such as mines and dams etc also points to colonial behaviour. Jazeel writes that colonialism can be interpreted as the physical occupation of territory and resources (2019). This evidence of colonial practices further adds to why China is a good choice for our study.

One example of China’s colonial actions is in The Democratic Republic of the Congo. Looking only at its natural resources, the DRC should be one of the richest countries on earth. However, a long history of colonialism and outside pillaging of its assets had robbed The DRC of its wealth. The most recent example is the high demand for cobalt, which the DRC has a lot of. Yet, China owns a majority of the production of cobalt in the DRC and makes the profit, while the local population is exposed to harmful, and even deadly, work conditions in the mines (Harris, 2022; Campbell, 2020). This is a good example of how China has adapted to the same post-colonial ways as the Western countries looking to enhance the wealth and keep the economic hierarchy (Hickel et al, 2021) and is clearly a case of physical occupation of both territory and resources (Jazeel, 2019). The mistreatment of locals is also a parallel to colonial behaviours.

As China’s investments are managed by the state (due to the communist system), they often have a geopolitical reason for the investments. The gains might not always be in money, but sometimes in political leverage. One example of this being the fact that almost all African states where China has invested, have stopped recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state (Harris, 2021). This shows that China's power over these states spill over to the geopolitical. Controlling another state's political agenda is very much considered colonial behaviour (Jazeel, 2019).

### 3.2 The Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, the Chinese government presented a plan to revive the ancient silk road, connecting China to Europe through land and sea. The project is supposed to expand Chinese trading routes and connect China to the world. This would be done by a marine “road” system and a belt of railways and highways extending from China all the way to Africa and Europe (Nationalencyklopedin, 2022b). This economic belt will span over 65 countries and connect 60% of the world population (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018) and in April 2019, the BRI as a
whole had signed 187 cooperation documents with 131 countries and 30 international organisations (Gu & Qiu, 2019). With a US$4 trillion budget, it is the most ambitious Chinese foreign investment project ever. Since it consumes most of the foreign investments from China right now, the BRI project is very relevant for our purpose to examine relationships between China and emerging economies. Further, considering the size of the project, it is representative of a lot of China’s foreign investments and the nature of them.

The goal of the BRI is to connect Asia, Europe and Africa through e.g. infrastructure, trade, investments, tourism and culture (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). According to Wijayasiri and Senaratne, the BRI has five key objectives (2018). Firstly, policy coordination, which is a strive for intergovernmental cooperation on macroeconomic policies. Second, increased connectivity hoped to be achieved by better trade infrastructure and trade cooperation. Third, financial integration by e.g. establishing a new development bank. Fourth, people-to-people bonds by increased tourism and academic exchanges and lastly unimpeded trade.

There is a deficit from the Chinese government on information about the BRI. One example being who actually manages the project. Even though the government stands behind it, critics claim that Chinese state owned enterprises are the ones who really influence how the BRI will evolve (CNBC international, 2019). Another aspect where information is hard to come by is the actual agreements in the BRI. Both the exact size and terms of the loans are hard to come by (Jie & Wallace, 2021). The type of agreement signed varies, but it is often some form of MOUs, which is not legally binding on any part but a start of negotiations (Wang, 2021). The obscurity around the project is a lot bigger than one might expect. No one even seems to be able to point out what projects of China that are actually included in the BRI (Jie & Wallace, 2021).

This lack of information raises concerns and mistrust. The lack of information is a contributing factor to the scepticism from the West towards the project. Concerns have been voiced of whether China is doing this to increase its geopolitical power and influence (ibid; Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). The Chinese government dismisses these concerns and claims that the initiative is not a tool of geopolitics, but rather that the West has an “outdated Cold War mentality”. The Chinese Government means that the BRI is in the interest of the whole world and that China is taking on a responsibility that will benefit all parties (Chinese Government, 2015a; Chinese Government, 2015b). The mistrust in China's good intentions
could be connected to the previous foreign investments by China and the consequences they have had for the local populations. One example being the funding of power plants in Laos and Cambodia which was an opportunity for China to make money on investments abroad but meant a big debt for the host countries, much hurting for the local population and a very negative effect on the climate in the region (Glysing, 2021).

The concerns on the BRI also come from other instances. Washington based, the centre for global development, has raised concerns for multiple countries getting big loans from China (CNBC international, 2019). Accusations and warnings about a possible debt trap for the states joining the BRI can be heard from multiple sources (Jie & Wallace, 2021; Bloomberg Markets and Finance, 2019; Githaiga & Bing, 2019).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and selection of cases

This study is a qualitative analysis aiming to examine the Chinese investment programme “The belt and road initiative” through a post-colonial lense. As explained under research question (section 2), the question seeks to categorise whether China's investment programme fits in the same postcolonial draining of emerging economies as scholars accuse the West of. The question is deductive, starting in the Post-colonial theory and the need to broaden it to include more than just former colonies. The continuance of colonial relationships between the West and the Global South is a well researched area. The study is cumulative as it builds on this field of research, (this paper mainly uses a recent article by Hickel et al from 2021), as well as the broad previous research on Post-Colonial Theory.

The chosen method is to gather information on the effects and events in the BRI project, in the chosen states, that is relevant to the aspects measured. (These aspects are further explained in section 3.1). The information is then viewed through a post-colonial lens. This theory is chosen due to its ability to critique global structures and hierarchies. The research is based mainly on the aspects of PCT that are assessed relevant for the purpose, in this case those are aspects valuable to describe the act of draining a state. As explained in the chapter on PCT (section 3.1) “draining” is defined as when a state with an advantage of power uses
their leverage to benefit, at the expense of the weaker state. In our research, this is best
defined by economic and geographical aspects. These are chosen because they are easy ways
of detecting when a superpower is preying on a developing country. The definition of these
aspects derive from post-colonial theory. Included in the economic aspect is e.g. uneven
trade, trade deficits, debt traps and unjust agreements. All of these are included in what
Hickel et al (2021) call post-colonial economic draining. The draining needs to be to the
benefit of China. If there were a trade deficit that instead benefitted Sri Lanka or Kenya, that
would rather be evidence that China does not practise the same draining economic
relationships. The economic aspect also makes sense since the purpose of the thesis is to
examine an economic investments programme. The geographical aspect is more concerned
with the sovereignty of states. As explained in the theoretical background, the appropriation
of land is a foundation stone in colonialism. Even if it might not look like a conquest today,
this still occurs. Included in the geographical aspect is dominating, owning or making big
investments in land abroad. Since China is acting outside their own borders on the ground in
their project hosts, it is important to include this aspect. These aspects are then used when
examining the projects in each country. The operationalization of draining is to look for
evidence of these aspects in all chosen texts. Anything concerning trade, debt and the
agreements is noted, as well as other comments on economic loss etc. The same goes for
anything concerning taking over/leasing land and decisions on location and geographical
placement of the projects. Further, information of other signs of draining is also noted, such
as geopolitical leverage, public opinion etc. The definition of draining (section 3.1) is used to
examine if read material is relevant or not for our purpose.

The chosen method of the text analysis instead of e.g. making a review of the actual initial
agreements in the BRI is because of the lack of information that occurs around the BRI. The
Chinese government has not released any official agreements, deals or likewise. This makes
an investigation of the actual agreements impossible, and our focus is therefore shifted to the
actual events and effects of the projects instead.

The decision to look at China came from my initial interest in whether the post colonial drain
applies also to non-Western super economies. Since very little research with PCT has been
done on non-colonial states, the choice was made to choose the most favourable case to
establish this use of the theory. China has already been criticised for the nature of their
investments in various parts of the world (Busse et al. 2016;Glysing, 2021). This makes
China a good candidate. The BRI as China's biggest international effort ever is also a perfect way to really see how the relationships look when China invests in emerging economies.

The decision to use Kenya and Sri Lanka in this study is firstly, based on the fact that neither has had a colonial relationship with China (which is crucial for our research purpose). Secondly that both are included in the BRI and they have some key differences that sets them apart. Sri Lanka has a long history of trade with China and has for a long time developed a relationship with the state. The trade relationship between Kenya and China is rather new. This difference is necessary to see if the possible postcolonial drain actually stems from the BRI and is not to be found in only new relationships. The decision to have two cases is also to enhance the ability to generalise the result to other Belt and Road-projects. If only the case of Kenya would have been studied, it would have been hard to generalise outside of the African continent since the relationship between China and other Asian states has a longer history and is different than the China-Africa one and vice versa. Despite the limitation in generalisation outside of the BRI, this study is hopefully a humble contribution to a start of a broader use of PCT in examining relationships besides the former colonisers- former colonies one.

Moving on to the reliability of this thesis, I would argue that the concepts of economic draining and land grabbing are distinct enough (see section 3.1) that someone else replicating the study would get the same results. There is always a risk, however, of a gap in the interpretations of the aspects and therefore also a difference in what the operationalization is, in this case, i.e. what the author looks for in the texts. If a replication was made with different sources, that could generate another outcome. This is why, as explained in the next section, the collection of sources has been crucial to achieve the most impartial result possible. Transparency in what sources used and how they were found is crucial for the reliability (Esaiasson et al, 2017). I am convinced however, that a replication with the same sources and operationalization would give the same result. Since this study does not concern a result in numbers or statistics, but merely a yes or no, the margin of error is wider and different interpretations of the aspects and operationalization does not rule out reliability.
4.2 Gathering of sources

A choice was made early on to exclude most information from Chinese sources due to the lack of credibility and the amount of corruption. The intentions of the Chinese government is clearly to paint the BRI as a panacea and that China’s intentions are only out of good will. Therefore other sources have been the primary information. The sources have been collected from the official library page of three universities (Uppsala University, Lund University and Linköping’s University), google scholar and some news and research pages on the internet. For the theoretical background on PCT, a lot of different scholars and writers were included to provide the most nuanced picture of the theory as possible. Since the theory is so broad, it was necessary to consume a lot of sources to settle on what features were relevant for the thesis’ purpose. For the previous research on the BRI, ideally would have been to use sources from the actual initiators of the BRI (Chinese government or corporations). However, this was not an alternative due to the lack of credibility. The source is instead mainly previous research and articles on the project. The same goes for the results. Since there is very little official information on the projects from China or the host countries, I rely on events that are reported on. This however brings the risk that the sources are angled in a negative way for China (since a lot of the sources are by Western authors). To the best of my ability the choice of sources has been handled with source criticism and attempts to mix sources with different opinions and viewpoints have been made to minimise the risk of biased information. Through the process of collecting information I have tried to be objective and aware of the possible framing in the texts. When finding the sources, the search-words have been as neutral as possible, e.g. “Belt and Road Initiative + Sri Lanka ” and “Hambantota port”. As much as possible, loaded words like “debt trap”, “draining” or “appropriating” have been avoided. The texts that have been chosen for the result often have “BRI” and the host-country in the title. If the text brings up the projects and hints of the aspects evaluated in this paper in the abstract or introduction, I would continue reading and taking notes.

One of the most used sources for the result on the BRI in Sri Lanka is the published article by Mexican scholars Wijayasiri and Senaratne from 2018. It might seem far-fetched to use articles from Mexico, but on the other hand, they are less likely to have a Western bias towards China. Their credibility is high due to their expertise on the area since both are scholars at, and Wijayasiri is research fellow and head of, the international economic policy research at the institute of policy studies of Sri Lanka at the National Autonomous University
of Mexico. However, one should be mindful of the fact that the article was written in 2018, and things, especially numbers and economics, can possibly have changed since then. One of the most used sources for the result on the BRI in Kenya is the article by Githaiga and Bing from 2019. Both Githanga and Bing are Chinese scholars from the Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan. This can initially bring concerns of whether they are biassed towards China. However, their article is published by Sage Publications, which means that it has been peer reviewed and approved. The text is very nuanced and provides arguments both for and against the BRI. It also provides a Chinese narrative in a concrete way.

4.3 Limitations and Obstacles

The biggest limitation of this study is the struggle in operationalizing such an abstract theory like PCT. The hardships in summarising and making PCT into something concrete that is possible to measure, also makes the validity lower. Validity is achieved when the theoretical definition corresponds to the operationalization and what we are actually measuring (Esaiasson et al, 2017). Hence, making sure that the theoretical aspects are actually what is being examined in the results is important. My fear is that the result can be experienced as unsystematic or not concrete enough. Which would also make the study harder to replicate. However, by trying to really explain and define how PCT is used in this particular research and making the delimitation to only two central aspects and focusing on these in the result, my hope is that, despite struggles, the validity is good.

Other limitations of this thesis have definitely been the unavailability of concrete information from reliable sources. Entering the process I thought that there would be more information from the Chinese and the Sri Lankan/Kenyan Government on the projects. However, looking into the actual projects and their consequences instead of the agreements (as the original thought was) might be a better choice in hindsight. This, because of how corrupt the Chinese government and enterprises are. Hence, the agreements would probably not have been a reliable source of information. Therefore, to achieve the purpose of this paper and examine the investments through PCT, we get the best insight in the projects by not using sources from the governments.
Another obstacle with sources could also be the possible subconscious negative lens towards China that the author might have going into the project due to a Western perspective. This has been handled by directing awareness towards this issue when reading sources, as well as deliberately choosing sources from both Western and non-Western authors.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 The BRI in Sri Lanka

The following text will examine the BRI in Sri Lanka through the lens of PCT using the aspects described in the theoretical framework (section 3.1).

First, an introduction to the BRI project in Sri Lanka. The inclusion of Sri Lanka in the BRI can be considered natural. Firstly, because the trade between China and Sri Lanka goes back even to the ancient silk road and the nations have had a strong exchange and collaboration since the 1950’s. In 2015, China was the top investor in Sri Lanka and stood for 15.5% of the total Foreign Direct Investments (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). Secondly, the inclusion of Sri Lanka seems expected due to Sri Lanka's good strategic placement in between Asia and Europe in the middle of the Indian ocean. China has conducted multiple projects in Sri Lanka on behalf of the BRI, the biggest ones being the airport in Mattala, the Hambantota port and the reconstruction of the Colombo port (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). The Mattala airport opened in 2013 after a US$ 200 Million funding from China. However, the project was not a success and the airport was named the world's emptiest (ibid; CNBC international, 2019). The aspirations of China in the Colombo project are to create a new international financial city. This business and economic hub would come to life by expanding and modernising the existing port in Colombo (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). To alleviate the crowding and support the Colombo port, the Hambantota port project was initiated to operate a part of the marine traffic. Besides these big projects, China has invested in coal power plants in Sri Lanka that in 2018 provided 40% of the nation's electricity, railways and water reservoirs and a big investment in Chinese tourism to Sri Lanka (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018).

Discussions regarding the economic aspect of the BRI in Sri Lanka tend to centre around the accusations that China would use the BRI as a “debt trap”, which means a strategy to indebt
developing nations with unsustainable loans for massive infrastructure projects. Once the nations are in high debt to China, the Chinese government would then use their debt to gain leverage over the government of said state (Jie & Wallace, 2021). This type of debt trap to gain control over a country is definitely a sign that the state is preying on a weaker economy, using their lack of money as a means to gain leverage, which adds up with our definition of draining. However, these debt trap accusations are contested. Some scholars claim that if Sri Lanka has a debt problem, it is not because of China or the BRI but rather due to Sri Lanka's overall high debt levels (Wignaraja et al., 2020). Wijayasiri and Senaratne (2018) describe the relationship between the states as good. A diplomatic pact has been in place since the 1950's and the early trade agreements were economically beneficial for Sri Lanka, rather than China. Since 1994 the Sri Lanka-China Business Economic Council has worked to strengthen the economic relationship between the states. This long history of relationship between the states speaks further against the notion that China deliberately would put Sri Lanka in a debt trap.

Despite existing concerns towards the BRI, there are advocates for the project (besides the Chinese government) that point out that the BRI will increase trade and strengthen Sri Lanka's position as an economic hub in the Indian ocean. These objectives align with Sri Lanka's own economic goals (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). Considering all of this, at first glance, the BRI in Sri Lanka does not look like a case of economic draining by China. However, the reality is an increasing trade deficit that has been growing every year since the 1980's and in 2018 stood at US $4 billion (ibid). This type of growing deficit discloses that the economic relationship between the states is more to China's benefit today. Having an economic superpower be the one most benefitting from the trade with an emerging economy does from a post-colonial point of view look like economic draining. A trade deficit this big could also be considered an occupation of resources, as the trade is only beneficial for one part. This is a strong parallel to colonialism and does definitely fit our definition of draining.

Even when good intentions are declared, it seems that China still finds a way to make a bigger profit. For instance, there was an initiative in place that Sri Lanka would operate the Hambantota port, to create jobs and keep the operation local. However, China took over the project, together with a 70 percent stake in the joint venture, through additional funding (ibid). Taking over and running projects in the Global South can also be considered appropriating opportunities. This deprives the local population of jobs and salary. Importing the workforce to do the high skills jobs does also fit the post-colonial view of appropriating
knowledge (Persam, 2007:10). In the case of the Hambantota port, China brought their own construction companies instead of hiring local ones (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). This further deprives Sri Lanka of opportunities, therefore also resources, in the form of lost income. However, one cannot know if China could have had other reasons for that, like cheaper workforce, special skills already known by the Chinese companies etc. Yet, other sources report displacement of local workers, replacing them with both legal and illegal Chinese workforce (Wignaraja et al, 2020). Hence, it is safe to say that China deliberately excluded Sri Lankan resources from the project, occupying the job opportunities and so also the income, once again, using their leverage to benefit themselves.

No matter how one addresses it, Sri Lanka is in debt to China, in a non-sustainable way. This means that the loans are too extensive for Sri Lanka to be able to pay in a short period of time. The US$ 3.5 Billion debt that Sri Lanka had to China in 2018 was, according to the IMF, the third-highest ratio among emerging economies at that time (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). The arrangement in Sri Lanka is a crisis to the extent that other states started pulling out of their Belt and Road-deals with China, e.g. the Maldives (Bloomberg Markets and Finance, 2019). In spite of the fact that the loan is too big for Sri Lanka to repay, China still continues to make investments after Sri Lanka was unable to repay the first loans. One could argue that this indicates that China is not very concerned with the economic welfare of Sri Lanka. Since China is leasing the port for the next 99 years, Sri Lanka will most likely not be able to benefit much from that project, as China is not paying for the leasing, but only writes off a part of the loan. Hence, Sri Lanka will have even less capacity to repay the loans as they grow. Even if Sri Lanka is benefiting some from the infrastructure built, they will have to use all the money earned to repay China and therefore not make real economic gain. The BRI in Sri Lanka therefore seems to only be economically beneficial for China. This shows proof of the kind of unequal relationship and economic draining that Hickel et al accuse the Global North of, in the BRI.

Moving on to the geographic aspect, the accusations of the debt trap sparked much after the handover of the Hambantota Port. Sri Lanka was not able to repay the loans, which resulted in a 99 year long lease of the harbour to China, starting in December 2017, as an alternative way of repayment (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). The question of whether this is a form of land grabbing arises. As described in the theoretical framework (section 3.1), land-grabbing is often disguised as investments (Tzouvala, 2019), which would be the case here. The evidence
of this increases when China continues to make further investments, achieving control over an additional 15000 acres of land, after gaining control of the Hambantota port (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). This is a clear case of a superpower's physical occupation of territory in another state. The continuance of investment and occupation of land despite the knowledge of Sri Lanka's inability to pay the loans shows that China is quite satisfied with the outcome in Hambantota. The length of the lease (almost a century) can also be interpreted as a bigger interest in receiving and controlling land rather than collecting repayment from Sri Lanka. This loss of sovereignty is definitely a form of post-colonial draining, and a prime example of how China uses their leverage to gain benefit at the expense of Sri Lanka.

Questions have been raised on whether China has geopolitical goals that they are pursuing with the BRI. Concerns have been rasied about possible military intentions for the Hambantota port and the US and India have both warned of a possible Chinese military toehold in the Indian Ocean (CNBC international, 2019; France-Press, 2022; Jie & Wallace, 2021). India has accused China of practising a “string of pearls” -strategy to take advantage of ports around the Indian ocean (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). So far, however, no military has been installed in Hambantota, and both Chinese and Sri Lankan authorities claim that there are no such plans (France-Press, 2022). Yet, the notion of controlling land in another nation for one's own geopolitical benefits is very reminiscent of colonialism.

There is evidence of hardships for locals due to the constructions (Ruwanpura et al, 2020; Safi & Perera, 2018). The local population in Sri Lanka protested the takeover of the Hambantota port, calling it a colonial invasion (CNBC international, 2019; Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). A Buddhist priest described an incident in December in 2018 where the Chinese flag was raised over the port for a week (Safi & Perera, 2018). The raising of their own flag indicates that China views this territory as their own, thereby denigrating Sri Lankan sovereignty. The way China has confiscated a part of sovereign land in Sri Lanka, against the popular opinion among locals and for a very long period of time, indicates the highest form of land grabbing.

5.2 The BRI in Kenya

The following section will examine the BRI in Kenya through the lens of PCT using the aspects described in the theoretical framework.
First, an introduction to the BRI project in Kenya. In the beginning of 2019, China had signed Belt and Road cooperation deals with 39 out of 53 African countries (Gu & Qiu, 2019). One of these countries is Kenya. The relationship between China and Kenya goes back to the 15th century when China had maritime convoys to what today is Kenya (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). This long time trade route is one reason for why Kenya was chosen to be included in the BRI. Kenya has, however, not had strong economic trade with China in modern times (ibid), until 2014 when China became Kenya's largest trading partner and Kenya climbed up to sixth place of China's largest trading partners in Africa (Gu & Qiu, 2019). Another probable reason for China to choose Kenya is that they border South Sudan, which is China's main oil exporter. Due to political instability and violent flare ups in South Sudan, going through Kenya to access the oil supply would be a better trade route.

China’s Belt and Road projects in Kenya include e.g. the construction and extensions of an airport (Gu & Qiu, 2019). However, the centrepiece of the BRI in Kenya is the first high-speed railway on the African continent (Jie & Wallace, 2021). This Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) from Mombasa to Nairobi is the project that this chapter will focus on primarily, since it is the main project and due to lack of information about other projects. The SGR was initiated and construction started in 2013, and in May 2017 the inauguration was held by president Kenyatta in Mombasa (Rumpel, 2017). The railway has successfully cut the travelling time between Mombasa and Nairobi and has taken over some traffic from the overburdened road systems (Gu & Qiu, 2019). However, the project was not as lucrative as anticipated. In spite of the Chinese Government's claims that the railway has been beneficial for Kenya, evidence indicates that the SGR has not lived up to expectations. Calculations from The Kenyan National Bureau Of Statistics (KNBS) disclose that in its first year, the rail link earnings were 44% less than expected. Both commuter and freight services were below estimated profitability (Gu & Qiu, 2019). The Kenyan government owns the railway, and earning money on the projects is crucial to be able to repay the loans to China for the investment and construction. If Kenya is not making money from the railway, they might be unable to repay the loans, possibly putting them in a debt trap.

Looking closer at the economic aspect of the BRI in Kenya, there is some controversy around the fact that the cost of the railway quadrupled from what was initially estimated, putting the Kenyan government in a much greater debt than what they had counted on (Rumpel, 2017; Gu
& Qiu, 2019). It should be noted that this could possibly be because of the lack of concrete numbers in the agreements when initiating the projects. However, since 72% of Kenya’s total debt is owed to China (Harris, 2021:06.55), it does not seem like China is avoiding pursuing unsustainable loans to Kenya. This of course sparks concerns of Kenya’s ability to repay the loans and what will happen if they cannot (Jie & Wallace, 2021). This is, especially, after the development of events in Sri Lanka and China’s obvious interest in the African region (Harris, 2021).

The opinions of Kenyans are divided. Some have reservations about the high price that was paid for the SGR, are worried about the debt and are critical of China’s presence (Moconomy, 2021). This even to the extent that some local groups have formed to protest the presence and projects (Tarrósy, 2019). Others are very optimistic, claiming that Kenya will only benefit from the trade with China and pointing out that Kenya is having an economic growth the last couple of years (Moconomy, 2021). However, even though Kenya is one of the fastest growing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, they still struggle with a lot of poverty and high rates of unemployment (Gu & Qiu, 2019). A quote in an IDSBulletin article by Gu and Qiu states that Africa needs the BRI to develop, and that the projects will be a win-win situation once their own people can start contributing to the infrastructure (2019:92). This sounds very positive; however, looking closer at actual projects, that win-win situation does not seem in close reach. The SGR project, which promised a lot of work opportunities for locals (Githaiga & Bing, 2019) did not seem to deliver on that in reality. After a whole year of operating, the most critical and well paid occupations like dispatchers and locomotive drivers at the SGR were still mostly occupied by Chinese employees (Gu & Qiu, 2019; Wafula, nd). In 2019 only 40% of the workers were locals, and Chinese workers occupied jobs that Kenyans were trained to do, only letting them have the less paid, “unskilled” jobs (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). This deprives Kenya of the economic rise they were hoping for since the unemployment does not decrease. However, this is not only bad for the economy, from a post-colonial perspective it looks like the Chinese are marginalising the Kenyans, confiscating opportunities and inhibiting development by appropriating jobs, which aligns with the post-colonial critique of appropriating knowledge (Persam, 2007:10). This view is enhanced by the fact that there is a wage gap between the locals and the Chinese workers on SGR. Even Kenyans with longer training receive lower salaries than the Chinese (Githaiga & Bing, 2019).
Conditions for the local workers seem overall very bad as there has been reports of racism, segregation and exaggerated disciplinary practices (Gu & Qiu, 2019; Rumpel 2017; Wafula, nd). The racism further proves that China does treat Kenya in a colonial way. Githaiga and Bing (2019) describe the relationship China generally has with Africa as colonial in the sense that most benefits accrue to China and are rarely mutual. The authors suggest that China uses Africa as “...a source of cheap labour and raw materials, as well as a suitable market for Chinese finished products.” (2019:221-222). They continue to describe how this undermines industrial and economic growth in Africa as they have to compete with China on their own market. This China-Africa trade deficit includes Kenya as well. Just like Githaiga and Bing explain the trade in general, Kenya's import from China is mainly (>90%) higher-value products like e.g. machinery and transport equipment. Especially in connection to the SGR where most of the construction machinery was from China. Using the BRI-project to increase exports of their own goods is a way for China to use their advantage in the deal to benefit themselves even more. In return, Kenya’s export to China consists of low-value products like agricultural and natural resources(Gu & Qiu, 2019). This has a clear parallel to colonialism where Western countries would refine cheap raw material from colonies and make money (Hickel et al, 2021).

Local manufacturers have had a hard time competing with Chinese companies on the domestic market with goods to the BRI projects due to cheaper prices and faster deliveries. Gu and Qiu call this neo-colonialism, and warn about the Chinese hegemony growing, with Africans powerless to stop it (2019:95). Since the trade between China and Kenya is relatively new, they do not have the same agreements, councils and overall relationship that China has with e.g. Sri Lanka. This means that going into the cooperation, Kenya as the economically weaker state has less protection against unjust deals than e.g. Sri Lanka. This lack of guidelines could give China a bigger opportunity to take advantage of Kenya. One example of this being, in the original agreement proposal from China for the loan, the demand was that all engineering contracts, construction contracts etc were given only to China (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). This was against Kenyan law, who demanded free competitive bidding in construction. The case was taken to the Kenyan high court, the agreement was changed but it was still, however, still only Chinese companies hired for the project (ibid). Viewed through the lens of PCT this shows clearly how China both has the power to make unfair demands and also how they are able to go around demands from
Kenya. By having Kenya pay off the loan over time, but Chinese companies earning on the construction etc, China is taking every chance to make profit on the expense of Kenya.

Moving on to the geographical aspect, China has not yet obtained any land in Kenya by the BRI. It is, however, a known fact that China invests in Africa to extract natural resources such as minerals. Some critics have suggested that China's involvement in infrastructure projects simply is a way for them to make the extraction of these minerals easier (Githaiga & Bing, 2019). This means that the SRG might be there to really only benefit China as they need to transport their minerals over the continent. The fact that it was a Chinese company that laid the route for the SGR, and not a Kenyan institution or government, raises the question even more of whether the SGR is actually constructed to benefit China. There are voices saying that Chinese companies were considerate of local ethnic groups and their geographical space when deciding the route of the railway (ibid). However, even if the companies have been considerate, does that justify China deciding the route of the railway? One would think that despite Chinese expertise on building, the Kenyan authorities should have the leading role in deciding how and where they want the railway to be built on their land. Even if the railway is not constructed to benefit China and their aspirations, it still seems that letting China decide over the land in Kenya in such a way, is very reminiscent of colonialism. The question also remains of what will happen if Kenya is unsuccessful in repaying their loans. If China were to obtain or lease any land in Kenya as well, a new evaluation would be needed.

6. Concluding discussion

Summarising the BRI project in Sri Lanka, one can state that the projects seem to not have benefitted Sri Lanka a lot, yet. While China has gained a whole port outside of their own territory. The investments seem to be economically indebting and draining Sri Lanka, the locals have been protesting the neo-colonial presence of China and a piece of sovereign land has been occupied by China. The evidence points to the fact that the BRI in Sri Lanka is, through the lens of PCT, draining in both the economic and geographical aspect.

Summarising the BRI project in Kenya, the results of the SGR is not as definite as the effects of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. However, despite optimism still remaining in many
sources about the BRI being a great lift for the economy in Kenya, they do not seem to benefit a lot from the actual project yet, mostly since the SGR project has been costing more than expected and is not making the anticipated profit. The evidence collected in this thesis points to an economic draining of Kenya in the form of growing debts without a sustainable repayment plan and a big trade deficit. As for the geographic aspect, China has not yet obtained land and even though there is suspicion of whether China has constructed the railway for their own benefit, this can not, at this moment, be proven. If, in a couple of years, it turns out that the railway transports mainly Chinese goods and not Kenyan, a new evaluation can be made on this matter.

Despite advocates for the importance and benefits of the BRI and the fact that the result did not turn out axiomatic, this thesis comes to the conclusion that China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, fits the post-colonial description of draining the examined states. Evaluating both the BRI project in Kenya and Sri Lanka through a post-colonial lense, looking at the aspects, it becomes clear that China is using their leverage to benefit themselves at the expense of said states.

What are possible reasons for this result then? One might condemn China as evil. Especially when used to a Western perspective where China is often portrayed as the villain. However, I do not think it is that simple. China is rather joining in on behaviour that other superpowers already are conducting. Not being “worse” than e.g. the US or Russia in their pursuit of wealth. China can be accused of being opportunistic, but the imperialistic world system is more to blame for the draining of the south, rather than one specific country who joins in on the already draining system. Reasons for why China is able to join in on this imperialist system can also be discussed. The BRI is a big risk for China, as they invest trillions of dollars is foreign projects. The fact that China has a communist government who controls a lot of the companies might possibly be an explanation. When other nations and companies have to focus on making fast profits for shareholders etc, the Chinese government can take more chances and hope that it will pay off, long term (Harris, 2022).

The results are a contribution to the notion that superpowers who are not a former coloniser still can take on a post-colonial draining position in their relationships with emerging economies and hence, hopefully a humble addition to the broadening of post-colonial theory. The results are somewhat generalizable in that sense that most of the BRI projects in the same
area, i.e. Africa and South Asia will probably have the same draining issue. This study is an in depth research of only two cases, and therefore does not attempt to generalise all Belt and Road projects as they are so broad and various. Mainly since the prerequisites for foreign investments in different parts of the world vary so much. This means that further research could be done on e.g. the BRI projects in Europe, South East Asia or the Middle East. This research will also hopefully inspire more research on both the BRI, the broadening of PCT and the draining relationship between states. Especially on issues not covered by this paper and result, such as e.g. a comparison of the relationship between China and these BRI-states and China’s relationship to developed economies, or a similar post-colonial evaluation on other nations, who are not former colonisers, and their foreign investments and politics, e.g. Brasil.

The most prominent weakness of this study is the lack of systematics in the operationalization. Even if the aspects are defined with examples of what is included in them, it is still up to the interpretation of the author reading the sources to make the inclusion to the result. If replicating this study, a few things could be done differently. Firstly, another way of conducting the study could be to more directly compare the actual actions of former colonisers with the ones of China. This would make operationalization easier since the research would be done by simply comparing two states on certain aspects in their foreign investments. It would not necessarily involve the PCT, but would still give a good contribution on whether the relationship to developing countries differ between two economic superpowers, where only one is a former coloniser. Secondly, to make an even more confident generalisation from the study, one could have focused on two cases in the same geographical area (e.g. Kenya and Djibouti). This would not generate a generalisation as big, but possibly a more certain one in a smaller geographic area. If the agreements on the BRI were to be made official, a new evaluation would be needed.
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