

BOOK REVIEW

## Rising Power, Limited Influence: The Politics of Chinese Investments in Europe and the Liberal International Order

Edited by Indrajit Roy, Jappe Eckhardt, Dimitrios Stroikos and Simona Davidescu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 266 pp. £76.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780192887115

Jeremy Garlick

Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czech Republic  
Email: [jeremy.garlick@vse.cz](mailto:jeremy.garlick@vse.cz)

Questions about China's ability to influence the international order have come to dominate discussions of the country's global role in the last quarter of a century. Such questions have intensified since the advent of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Investment capital accumulated from China's export-led economy funds the BRI's programme of infrastructure construction in the Global South. Thus, it is only natural that observers should begin to critically examine the extent to which the Chinese government is building political influence in partner countries via BRI investments, as Yu Jie and Ran Hu do in the first two chapters of the edited volume *Rising Power, Limited Influence*.

The book seeks to evaluate the extent to which Chinese investments are impacting the so-called "liberal international order" (LIO) set up by the US and its allies after the Second World War. In the introductory chapter, following John Ikenberry, Indrajit Roy and Ran Hu define the LIO in terms of five key features: openness in trade; rules-based relations between states; collective security; the transformation of international society through cooperation between states; and the spread of democracy through internationalization (p. 6). The study therefore sets out to investigate the extent to which Chinese investments present a challenge to the LIO or merely maintain and support it, while connecting this question to the issue of Chinese political influence arising from its investments in partner countries.

Curiously, however, despite the focus on evaluating the connections between China's investments and the possible challenge to the LIO, the editors elect to focus predominantly on Chinese investments in Europe: six out of ten chapters analyse Chinese investments in specific European countries and regions, mainly in the east and south of the continent. The intent is to draw conclusions about China's intentions for the LIO from these European case studies. However, this seems an analytical stretch, since the LIO, being a phenomenon with global implications, is not only about Europe. It seems a tall order to draw conclusions about the degree to which Chinese investments are influencing the global order from studying only engagement with Europe.

The issue is compounded by Roy and Hu's assumption that China's "sprawling investments across 120 countries via the Belt and Road Initiative have had limited impact in shaping host countries' attitudes towards China" (p. 2). This assertion is surprising for two reasons. First, this conclusion is reached very early in the book and without any supporting evidence. Second, the claim flies in the face of China's growing political influence arising from its considerable investments in economically weak neighbouring countries, such as Laos, Cambodia and Pakistan. None of the chapters analyse China's investments in Asia. Thus, the book does not examine

China's steadily increasing political influence in its Asian neighbourhood, or the extent to which it is generated through BRI investments.

Be this as it may, chapters by Catherine Jones and Jan Knoerich attempt to assess the global impacts of Chinese investments on the LIO. In her chapter focused mainly on Africa, Jones concludes that Chinese investments support rather than challenge the LIO by filling investment gaps left by Western countries. However, this conclusion seems counter-intuitive when recalling the features of the LIO presented by Roy and Hu in the introductory chapter. Most problematically, it must be pointed out that China does not support democratization, promotes collective security on its own terms rather than those of the LIO, tends to ignore the LIO's rule-based approach in favour of its own practice-based norms (see Jeremy Garlick and Fangxing Qin, "China's 'do-as-I-do' paradigm: practice-based normative diplomacy in the global South," *The Pacific Review*, 2023 37(5), 985–1015), and favours bilateral trade and investment deals whose terms are often known only to the partners. Chinese partners tacitly accept all of these norms when they agree to Chinese investments. In other words, Chinese investments through the BRI unmistakably challenge most of the key features of the LIO presented by Roy and Hu at the start of the book – a point not mentioned by Jones. This also calls into question Knoerich's conclusion that "outward FDI is not a particularly promising instrument to mount a challenge to the Liberal International Order."

Leaving these issues to one side, it must be acknowledged that the book contains some solid case studies. Dimitrios Stroikos's chapter on Greece stands out for its level-headed analysis: support is provided for the book's thesis of investments producing only limited political influence. Malgorzata Jakimów examines China's relations with the Visegrád group of countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), finding a mixed picture of mainly limited normative influence. A similar conclusion is presented by Filippo Boni concerning China's limited normative influence in Italy. Simona Davidescu describes China's aborted attempts to invest in nuclear energy in the UK and Romania. Nicholas Crawford's examination of China's economic diplomacy in the Western Balkans reveals that it is less of a threat to the European Union and the LIO than is sometimes feared, with the degree of Chinese influence dependent on the attitudes of specific regimes. Ágnes Szunomár investigates the political motivations behind Sino-Hungarian economic cooperation, albeit without revealing much new information about Viktor Orbán's reasons for cooperating with China – or anything substantial about the impact of Chinese investments in Hungary on the LIO.

Overall, the volume can be recommended for its studies of individual European countries' relations with China. However, even here there are gaps, most obviously concerning Chinese investments in the EU's economic powerhouses Germany and France. The two countries are mentioned in places but do not have dedicated chapters. Again, this is odd, since, as Knoerich points out, the bulk of Chinese investment capital has ended up in Western Europe. The book therefore lacks definitive answers concerning the impact of China's European investments on the LIO, and rests heavily on the initial assumption that China's political influence on its partners remains limited. As the editors admit in the book's concluding chapter, this leaves plenty of room for more research concerning the political implications of Chinese investments.