

The Modern Manifestation of the Commodity Frontiers

Comparing China's Belt and Road Initiative to the United States Military Expansion

Just as the United States is the leader of the global North, many would argue that China has become the leader of the Global South. These two countries strikingly mirror each other, from their political power to their economic influence and networks of relationships. This is most apparent when focused on each nation's attempts to shape the geopolitical landscape through trade, economic development, and, increasingly, military presence. Over the past decade, China has been actively investing in global port infrastructure to create a modern-day maritime Silk Road, and, possibly, to define the future of contemporary geopolitical competition. Their heightened focus on gaining influence abroad through strategic economic assistance and military investment echoes historical American (and Western) patterns of geopolitical positioning. Chinese initiatives center on expansionism and control. These overseas China investments, in many ways, mirror what the United States and many countries have done. These historical examples provide a lens on the commodity frontier. Indeed, China's investments in overseas ports and resource access are a modern manifestation of the capitalist commodity frontier framework. The commodity frontier framework provides insights into historical global resource extraction and supply chain patterns. These resources have included minerals, crops, timber, and fossil fuels, to name a few. China's port investments and economic development assistance fit within these historical patterns. While the direct parallels between China's overseas investment and the United States' military expansion around are less apparent, this may simply be reflective of the fact that China's expansion are still in their early stages. As China's commodities continues to develop, it may feel increasingly compelled to deploy its military force to secure the holdings. Examining China's motivations and the impact of its port investments using the commodity frontier framework can highlight a new branch of the theory and take advantage of the usable past to explore how previous Western expansions may have set the stage for this new wave of global South expansionism.

China's active investments in global ports are driving an ongoing shift in geopolitical power, highlighting China's push to be seen as the leader of the Global South. While the Chinese may frame their efforts in more positive terms, they are, at their core, a modern manifestation of commodity frontiers. As the U.S. did, particularly after World War II, China seeks to secure strategic resources and facilities for critical use in global trade, logistics, and military competition. For a country that has traditionally had very limited engagement around the world, China is blazing a new path. However, in many ways, it is using lessons from the past to inform its ongoing campaign to grow its geopolitical influence. This essay will not reflect in depth whether China's expansionism is a net positive or negative for the world or the specific countries and regions involved, it will use it to illustrate the core concepts behind the commodity frontier framework. Viewing China's investments in global port infrastructure through the lens of a commodity frontier changes the traditional narrative regarding Western resource extraction of the South. It fosters a new paradigm in which the Global South seeks to assert increasing agency on the global economy and political dynamics.

The Context of Commodity Frontiers

To understand this new manifestation of commodity frontiers, it is worthwhile to review the commodity frontier and its historical context. The traditional theory of commodity frontiers originates from an analysis of the history of global capitalism. It is the study of the entanglements that Western countries have pursued dating back to their colonial control of resources and overseas territories. From this historical perspective, as the author Beckert and others mention, the notion of these frontiers is intertwined with “Europe’s economic ascendancy” to secure land, labor, and materials for “the consumption of massive amounts of extra-European resources” (Beckert, Bosma, Schneider, & Vanhaute, 2021, p. 449). The framework shows how, over the past 600 years, rural-urban relations often grew as Western capitalistic societies flourished given the resource-rich areas on which they were located. These areas were then folded into commodity-producing regions, and then further as the region was integrated into the global economy. These new and evolving levels of incorporation often led areas to economically thrive due to new global connections. At the same time, however, they fostered new dependencies for farmers and the locals along these commodity frontiers. This dependence became ever-increasing as global linkages grew. Thus, European capitalist expansion accelerated with access to the natural resources and cheap labor along its global frontier, even as these connections dynamically reshaped the affected regions.

Recently, scholars have called attention to these historical entanglements and patterns of global resource extraction, examining their suitability and the social impact of supply chain patterns. They have observed that process of Western resource extraction has caused significant "economic risks and the environmental and social costs of corporate-led production" on "marginalized people and places" (Beckert et al., 2021, p. 447). Take, for example, the case of sugar crops in European colonies. Sugar is the commodity cash crop of both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which occupy a shared island in the Caribbean but experienced quite different colonial pasts. The Dominican Republic benefited from a Spanish colonialist past focused on building a self-sustaining agricultural society. In contrast, in Haiti, the French overplanted and took advantage of the colonial extraction possibilities (Harris, 2017). Centuries later, Haiti is far less economically and politically developed than neighboring Dominican Republic. This is the product of how historical geopolitical and economic forces shaped the development of the country's agricultural sector. Lasting economic disparities developed because of the particular nature of the global commodity supply chains and the environmental effects they produced. Both countries’ incorporation in the broader global economy led to economic development, even if the long-term consequences were strikingly different. At the same time, the community frontiers European capitalist expansion fostered led to environmental degradation and affected the agency of human and nonhuman participants alike. Thus, the natural environment is intertwined with long-term economic development. As author Gerber examined using the lens of anti-mining conflicts, commodity frontiers and their links to environmental degradation and degrowth have pushed assessments of the entanglement of human activities toward consideration of ecological factors (Gerber, 2020). The ongoing exploration of extractive industries and capitalist expansion has highlighted commodity frontiers' relation to trade, economic growth, and environmental degradation and caused one to look at the multi-layer perspective of the notion and the socio-technical transitions involved.

This multi-layer perspective of socio-technical transitions, as they relate to commodity frontiers, draws attention to military expansion, particularly in strategically vital locations worldwide. Controlling

attractive and resource-rich land along commodity frontiers has significantly shaped nations' global political and economic influence. As argued by Beckert, "commodity frontiers are core constituents of the modern world" (Beckert et al., 2021, p. 437). Moreover, land that historically had been valued for its profit potential from agriculture and resource extraction was increasingly viewed as a capitalist asset in and of itself. Its value grew beyond its ability to support physical production to become an essential piece on the chessboard of a complex geopolitical and economic competition. Old and new actors rapidly exploited this commodification of land as a strategic resource. Meyfroidt reflects the sentiment to note how "global statistical models" as they relate to the land's agro-environmental qualities "explain the broad patterns of global cropland extent and distribution., the "vast heterogeneity" struggle to account for the "recent global cropland expansion in frontiers" (Meyfroidt et al., 2024, p. 2). Thus, from an academic viewpoint, the traditional lens of the commodity frontier cannot fully explain the expansion of the contemporary commodity frontier. This new explanation of what land means in the realm of commodification can be partly attributed to outside geopolitical forces across the globe.

Direct or indirect control of territory can be a source of critically needed political influence and representation. For instance, national investment in overseas industries or the development of strategic military bases can provide means to influence events locally and regionally. This points to how a territory can be valued and used as a commodified asset beyond the traditional resource extraction and agricultural context framework. The recognition has created a new meaning of what can be thought of as the commodity frontier. As explained by Meyfroidt, this territorialization is where powerful actors can exploit land-use frontiers for strategic purposes, broadening the geopolitical realm of influence (Meyfroidt et al., 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, Reilly and Coyne describe the significance of military bases for economic development, both in shaping local market dynamics and creating new opportunities (Reilly & Coyne, 2024). They highlight how international engagement in an area can have a significant social and economic impact on local communities. Thus, military expansion, whether through bases or infrastructure investment, is a modern form of land-based commodity frontiers. The territory is commodified not for its natural resources but rather for the geopolitical power that it can offer. In this context, infrastructure investments represent the economic potential of land for the actors who occupy it and the locals who surround it. This duality of defense and economic development in the land use transformation comes with commodification (Berger, 2024). As a result, the critical infrastructure created goes beyond just the concrete and brick. Instead, it comprises the new industries developed and the cities supporting them.

United States and Military Expansion

The United States, the world's leading economic and military power, has used its extensive reach to reinforce and sustain its geopolitical position. World War II was a critical turning point for the United States, developing and demonstrating its economic strength as the "arsenal of democracy," its military capabilities in fighting on fronts worldwide, and its growing political influence in reshaping the post-war world. Emerging from its isolation and economic turmoil of the 1930s, the US was left largely unscathed yet far more powerful than European powers that had experienced the war's destruction while losing control of their overseas colonies. Economically, "America's contribution to the industrial production of the capitalist world" drastically increased from "42% in 1937 to 60% in 1945," thanks both to the rapid development of the military-industrial complex built to support the war effort and the destruction of other developed economies (Wang, 2023, p. 1659). The United States itself was largely untouched by the war, apart from the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. American troops were deployed across the globe at the

war's end, and the United States was uniquely positioned to contribute to the massive post-war rebuilding effort that needed to happen. Moreover, the war had led to enormous growth in the resources and capabilities of the US government, providing it with the tools and organizational infrastructure needed to assert its global leadership. Moreover, the emerging conflict with the Soviet Union provided an ideological rationale for American leadership at a time when no other Western power was able to act.

As a result, the United States established an extensive global network of alliances and military bases to assert its dominance on an international scale. Through trade, economic development, and military cooperation and intervention, the United States was able to exert control over strategic territories. It used these strategic assets to promote its military, economic, and ideological interests, ultimately attaining a position of global hegemony. The threat posed by the Soviet Union and communism further drove American military expansion. During this time, the United States "took a position as the global leader and peacekeeper," leading to massive international expansion of the United States military infrastructure (O'Dell, 2023). Furthermore, as Vine notes, the presence of the United States military infrastructure postwar was "accepted unquestioningly and treated as an obvious good, essential to national security" (Vine, 2015). Outside of the communist bloc, a new world power order was founded, and the United States was its leader. This new order relied on the US military to maintain a defensive posture against perceived threats, deter aggression against the US and its allies, and intervene in crises when deemed necessary. It also created a network of American logistical hubs (Paul, 2021). Thus, the United States' post-war military infrastructure enabled the nation to project power on a global scale while demonstrating the United States' economic dominance.

Today, one can still observe the lasting global impacts of the United States' political-military expansion and intervention. The United States military has "nearly 800 military bases in more than 70 countries and territories abroad," including bases in Italy, Japan, Honduras, Burkina Faso, and Iraq (Vine, 2015). These many bases ensure that the United States can assert itself militarily virtually anywhere in the world. These facilities also produce and support meaningful economic influence. For example, the US and South Korea have maintained very strong relations, including the deployment of US troops, since the 1950s as part of their effort to deter North Korea. These installations contributed meaningfully to the local economies, both directly and indirectly. As Wang notes, "alliance-based acquisition of foreign military installations promotes bilateral economic and commercial ties between the nations leasing foreign military installations and their host nations" (Wang, 2023, p. 1657). However, it is essential to note that, in a narrow sense, maintaining overseas bases and deployment of troops represent a drag on the US economy. Despite this, there is little doubt that these military installations have made the US a global superpower and given it lasting influence and economic control. In short, there has been a close relationship between military expansion and economic influence, leading to a cycle of reinforcing economic and military power and global hegemony.

China's Manifestation of Commodity Frontier

With the second largest population, communist China has emerged over the last three decades as an economic powerhouse and a leading exporter of goods to the rest of the world. While the label "made in China" is familiar to consumers around the world, its position as a leader of the Global South is a newer development. Like the United States, China has pursued an increasingly ambitious economic and military expansion program over the past decade. Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is central

to this modern-day geopolitical expansion strategy (Xinhua, 2023). The plan included more than "200 cooperation [Chinese signed] documents" with "more than 150 countries and more than 30 international organizations" and has resulted "in more than 3,000 cooperation projects" with "nearly 1 trillion U.S. dollars in investment" (Xinhua, 2023). Apart from the BRI, Chinese investments include spending on around 100 global ports along the "Maritime Silk Road (MSR)," which have provided China with "economic and geopolitical" influence (Donnellon-May, 2023) (Pallis, 2023). China has made port investments in Pakistan's Port of Gwadar, Sri Lanka's Hambantota International Port and Port Colombo, Australia's Port Darwin, Turkey's Kumport Port, and even North Korea's Port Rajin (Pallis, 2023). For context, the Maritime Silk Road is designed to enhance connectivity between China and Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. It is intended to more closely integrate China into these global trade routes and supply chains. Investments are focused on the development of port infrastructure, including "industrial parks, logistics clusters, free trade zones, and infrastructures connecting" (Oulmakki, Rodrigue, Meza, & Verny, 2023, p. 13). Importantly, China's port infrastructure investments are often made through state-owned entities (SOEs). In many countries, SOEs account for less than 50 percent of port ownership. However, state-owned Chinese corporations account for the majority stake in the Container Terminal or Port Authority projects in Greece, Spain, and Belgium (Pallis, 2023). These investments display many of the characteristics of historical commodity frontier examples. As Jenkins notes, these investments enable China not only to become less dependent on "imported raw materials" but also lead to "new government strategies to ensure the security of supplies" through the facilitating of the flow of goods and resources (Jenkins, 2018, p. 53). In controlling the critical maritime hubs, China has secure access to the market and resources while also being integrated into and prioritizing its needs. At the same time, other nations have become dependent on China because of its economic influence and control over the ports.

Chinese government-sponsored port investment represents a modern-day manifestation of a commodity frontier typical of capitalist expansion. It represents the physical global expansion of Chinese economic power and is symbolic of its maritime geopolitical influence. While this initial expansion is carried out by Chinese SOEs, as Donnellon-May notes, these actions align with national objectives within the framework of commodified frontiers through its foundational goal of supporting economic expansion and control of new regions. Critically, the difference between these investments and other historical activities along the commodity frontier is that many of China's efforts focus less directly on raw materials than on building critical infrastructure. This is similar to the United States' pursuit of international military bases. As seen with Chinese corporations' investment in the Greek Port of Piraeus and European rail infrastructure, China has a "growing dominance in commercial maritime and land routes" (Donnellon-May, 2023). Specifically, the Port of Piraeus is valuable as a significant trans-Mediterranean commercial hub and potential military and naval use if needed (Zoe Liu, 2024). Thus, the port investments are comprehensive and can reshape global trade. However, unlike historical commodity frontiers, many "European countries welcomed new infrastructure investments," even if they changed the existing port hierarchy (Oulmakki et al., 2023, p. 2). Thus, unlike past cases, this new manifestation of commodity frontiers is not generally seen as exploitation, even if they enhance Chinese influence and power over the long term. That said, China's global port investments are multifaceted and complex. They share many similarities with previous capitalist and military expansions while introducing new approaches that highlight their cooperative nature. Nevertheless, they are reshaping the international economic hierarchy, even if it is through agreed-upon global engagement and relationships.

Chinese investment in global ports is far from a purely commercial pursuit driven by both economic and geopolitical interests. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said about the Belt and Road Initiative, it is “a public good China offers the world China offers the world ... [that] has grown into the largest platform for international cooperation” (Roy & Hu, 2024, p. 5). His message highlights China’s role as a cooperative and international player for trade development. However, much like the United States’ efforts to position itself as the global ‘peacekeeper’ following World War II, China is pursuing a clear strategy designed to enhance the country’s economic and military influence. In securing these maritime hubs, China is, in turn, expanding its international presence, both physically and symbolically. These ports position China on key nodes in the global trade network while also serving as a sign of their power and control. This influence is particularly strong in less developed regions in Africa and Asia. Furthermore, the network provides China with a geopolitical platform to voice its views across an expanded region. Beyond physical infrastructure, China’s investments also provide a global digital network for their frontier of influence. They now have access to local data networks, and the global ports serve as a digital hub for information flows around the world. Thus, the investments create a multivariate strategic asset, offering the potential to control trade routes, expand China's physical presence, enhance its global influence, and promote the Chinese government’s image and goodwill among participating nations. As Grady explains, these investments aim to project power and gain strategic access. China’s actions, in fact, mirror the historical efforts of the “British and Dutch East India Companies in setting up trading ports in India and what is now Indonesia” and the creation of the commodity frontier (Grady, 2024). Furthermore, as these past examples illustrate, these types of frontiers can generate lasting global and economic impact while fostering hierarchical structures in the societal order. This follows previous economic, political, and capitalist patterns.

The fact that infrastructure investments are intertwined with political and military objectives blur the line between economic development and geopolitical dominance. A duality of economic and geopolitical influence is closely tied to the presence of a commodity frontier. Scholars at the United States National War College and the United States Naval War College have highlighted the concerning nature of China's investment strategy. As Murphy, a professor of national security strategy, explains, "China's military does not have a "large military footprint overseas," in fact, they only have "one base in Djibouti," opened in 2017. This compares to the United States's "800 military bases" worldwide (Grady, 2024) (Donnellon-May, 2023)(Huang, 2021). However, the ports in which it is investing present a dual-use possibility for economic and "power projection or intelligence gathering," thus, in a way, creating a large international footprint (Grady, 2024). This is notable given Chinese President Xi Jinping recent "military modernization drive" aimed specifically at developing and acquiring "new military equipment" (Huang, 2021). Numerically, China already has the world's largest navy. China's establishment of commercial seaports and its naval investment program make it difficult to deny the connection between port investments and broader strategic maritime ambitions. In short, China’s efforts are designed to produce geopolitical benefits, even if their usefulness has yet to be truly tested.

The Chinese port investment strategy is critically different from the approach of the United States after World War II. This is especially true regarding how China’s expansion strategies interact with the local population and host country. China's approach is focused on commercial investments in the local economy. This strategy more subtle and can disguise the potential military usefulness of its engagement. This contrasts with the US approach, which may have led to economic development aid and commercial investment but typically prioritized military ties at the outset. This civilian-military fusion, a known

Chinese strategy, has enabled China to expand its influence without a clear military presence. This also allows local cooperation more easily. As Xinhua highlights, the ongoing port investments are framed as “mutually beneficial” economic cooperation as opposed to a “China threat” because of military expansion (Xinhua, 2023). What is maintained is a peaceful narrative of infrastructure development cooperation, led not by the Chinese navy but by Chinese corporations. As a result, these projects are often welcomed sources of infrastructure development and economic growth by host nations, unlike past colonial expansions. At least initially, they are viewed as voluntary partnerships instead of exploitative relationships along the commodity frontier.

That said, China's investment in port infrastructure has sometimes received mixed reactions from local populations and host nations. There is no question that the host nations benefit, at least economically in the short term, from the investments. However, there is a question about the long-term effects and concerns regarding Chinese objectives for their investment in the first place. Understanding local perspectives is key to understanding the overall impact of Chinese port investments. Take the example of “COSCO's presence in Piraeus,” which, according to the local newspaper Kathimerini, seems to be an overall “win-win relationship” (Calatayud, 2023, p. 13) that yielded significant economic benefits and enabled “Greece's economic recovery” (Calatayud, 2023, p. 9). A major concern for the Greek people was the impact of the labor market and practices. While there was a decrease in pay and maintenance, an increased volume of jobs occurred. As Calatayud best put it, “China and COSCO [became] symbolically linked” to Greece's financial stability (Calatayud, 2023, p. 10). Consequently, a majority welcomed the investments because of the country's troubled financial condition. China saw an opportunity and took it. Similarly, Italy and Spain saw China's port investments as beneficial. In Italy, its “prime ministers also see [it as] potentially fruitful” and have seen it as an opportunity for its economy. Likewise, many “small and medium enterprises” have viewed the investment favorably and “appreciate the Chinese way of conducting business” (De Maio, 2020, p. 4-5). The investments have been said to have already created “around 1,000 jobs” and work with local universities and innovation companies (De Maio, 2020, p. 9). For Spain, there is a consensus regarding the benefits of the Chinese investment, but also some cautiousness given China's position as both a partner and, more importantly, a rival (Esteban & Armanini, 2023, p. 1). For host nations, China's investments do create some level of economic dependence and, as De Maio puts it, raise the possibility of “economic blackmail” (De Maio, 2020, p. 13). Furthermore, “Chinese investment is portrayed as a security threat for EU populations' privacy and safety,” thus provoking calls for a more protectionist stance (i.e., applying screening mechanisms to investments) (Calatayud, 2023, p. 12). In diving into the local perspective of these case studies, it is clear that host nations are trying to find a balance between economic incentives in the short term and the potential security risks of Chinese investment and their geopolitical underlying goals. These dilemmas and debates are precisely what Chinese leaders have sought to accomplish, forcing European countries to pay heed to Chinese interests and generating at least some degree of dependence on China and its maritime network.

The Parallels and Differences

The new manifestation of the commodity frontier seen through China's port investments echoes the post-World War II United States military expansion movement. Both reflect a combination of economic expansion with a geopolitical and military agenda. At its core, these strategies are designed to allow each country to assert its dominance and ensure its future interests are protected. China is projecting power through its “Belt and Road Initiative,” whereas the United States emphasized its geopolitical dominance

through its "strategic peace through military bases and defense alliances" (Sawant, 2021). Furthermore, both nations leverage the infrastructure for strategic purposes, demonstrating the ability of past usable infrastructure to inform new geopolitical strategies. For context, usable infrastructure pasts is the concept that past infrastructure of any type can address modern-day challenges. This framework emphasizes the five 'hidden layer' lenses, which allow multiple pasts to be studied and adopted, thus enabling a "progressive infrastructure future" (Moss, 2024, p. 50). This is because, for both nations' expansion strategies, the historical patterns of trade and conflict inform modern geopolitical strategic movements. Not only are China's investments in global ports repurposing existing infrastructures, much like Moss's Berlin water pumps, but their actions are also intended to meet newly set geopolitical and economic goals. This is like how the United States used its position after World War II to promote and further its military and strategic goals. While the expansion of the United States was ideologically and militarily justified to counteract its "former adversary, the Soviet Union," China has taken a more subtle and less confrontational approach (Sawant, 2021). China has focused on civilian infrastructure, such as ports and rail lines while avoiding framing its investments ideologically (except, perhaps, non-intervention in domestic affairs). Although their approaches differed, both pursued them to generate economic influence and military establishment. The differing approaches have (so far) produced different narratives and relationships with the host nations. For the United States, military presence over time often produced criticism from local populations. In contrast, China has been able to present itself as an economically beneficial partner (Paul, 2021).

However, there are vast differences between the United States' 70-year-old network of global bases and alliances and China's newly built (and still evolving) network of investments. While both might be said to have built "commodity regimes," they operate on quite different scales (Beckert et al., 2021, p. 449). This involves far more than land-based infrastructure relationships. In the case of the United States, it also often involves explicit or implicit alliances, security cooperation, and mutual defense commitments. Nevertheless, local populations may react similarly. Both United States military bases and Chinese port investments may be welcomed by some and also criticized by others concerned about dependence and security. This pushback for both types of commodity frontier aligns with the historical potential of economic exploitation dependency. These two types of commodity regimes' territorialization reflect a new evolution of the land-use commodity frontiers framework, which remains central in the age of technological advancement and globalization.

Considering these two countries' geopolitical expansion within the context of modern societal transitions, one can see that both leveraged their sociotechnical imaginaries to demonstrate their dominance. Both created narratives around a positive imagination to enable its expansion. China presented itself as an economic benefactor for the nations involved while the United States presented it as the defender of the free world and a guardian of global peace. In other words, both countries sought to portray themselves as saviors and do-gooders. Which, in reflection on the created narratives for the global order, is almost ironic. China aims to be a global leader by exerting soft power, whereas the United States relied heavily on its ability to wield hard power. From the perspective of the nonhuman agency, both strategies have reshaped the physical environment and its ecosystems, creating lasting impacts. These impacts have affected the landscapes as a result of infrastructure development as well as broader regions as the economies have been reshaped. This is in line with De Carvalho & Lähdesmäki reflection on how human and nonhuman entities are interconnected (De Carvalho & Lähdesmäki, 2023, p. 92). Thus, the two types of manifestation of commodity frontiers might be different in their nature, but are, in fact, much more

similar than one would think. Studied from a multi-lens perspective, both leverage historical pasts and use them with their modern sociotechnical imaginaries to maintain their nations' global power and strategic control.

China, the Leader of the Global South

China may not yet be able to challenge the United States military primacy yet, but, its port investments reflect its broader ambitions to become the leader of the Global South. While dividing the world into North and South is a vast oversimplification of the complexities of historical patterns of global inequalities, it does draw attention to the legacies of Western expansion and the resulting power dynamics. The Belt and Road Initiative, along with the Maritime Silk Road program is building a platform on which China can claim the role of being a critical leader in the Global South. Unlike those that pursued commodity frontier expansion in the past, China can point to his history of as a victim of past colonial expansion to distinguish its intentions. China's port investments in countries that once were part of colonial empires promises to rebalance global power structures. Chinese leaders emphasize that these ongoing investments are part of China's focus on building cooperative international relationships. Nevertheless, it is also clear that it is part of China's long-term strategy to exercise influence and control of global trade, secure resources, and grow its geopolitical influence. China's goals are ambitious, seeking to move the Global South away from its traditional dependency on Western powers and the system they created. China is challenging the existing liberal international trade order dominated by the United States and its Western allies. Indeed, through its majority ownership of key parts of global ports, particularly in Europe, it seeks to "flip the script," making the industrialized West dependent on China and its partners. Beyond just changing the economic narrative, China is using ports as geopolitical chess pieces in their effort to exert influence across the globe.

This is a new game for China. Similar to how the US used its network of bases and alliance in the fight against communism, China is building a physical footprint through ports across Asia, Africa, and Europe. At the same time, China's is portraying its efforts as a benign form of soft power, creating influence through mutually beneficial economic development which has permitted rapid expansion while leaving the door open to dual-use territorialization. While China promotes the commercial aspects of its initiatives, they also provide clear military and intelligence value, giving Chinese leaders a growing degree of control through these critical maritime hubs. Western observers recognize China's creation of a new commodity frontier, raising fears regarding China's growing control and Western dependence. The United States and others have expressed major concerns over the security risks that could arise from Chinese dominance. These risks touch the economic, military, and cybersecurity spheres and there is little question that China's control of critical infrastructure potentially gives it significant leveraged. These investments have created a sophisticated strategic dual-purpose platform to expand Chinese geopolitical influence. As China expands its international presence, its ability to reshape global power dynamics will, in effect, reinforce its narrative that China is the leader in the Global South.

Today, China is making significant port investments, and through this built frontier, ensuring itself geopolitical power and its position as a leader of the Global South. Their modern manifestation of commodity frontiers parallels historical patterns of the United States' military expansion after World War II. The two countries both recognized the value of land-based commodities and their critical locational value to influence global economic and political spheres. The China case demonstrates the modern

transition of commodity frontiers, and use of multifaceted transition theories helps explain the strategic move. From repurposing the usable past to leveraging created sociotechnical imaginaries, China is asserting its geopolitical influence. Furthermore, their actions further demonstrate their desire to reshape the Western-dominated world to benefit themselves and supposedly the Global South. China's new manifestation of the commodity frontier framework in the 21st century mirrors the United States' actions in the 20th century. Both nations changed the narrative of the traditional notion of commodity frontier and brought attention to the critical value of dual-use territorialization, both economic to military. While this essay is not a reflection on the morality or desirability of China's or the United States' expansionism, it is meant to demonstrate how the lens of commodity frontier framework theory through the multifaceted modern societal transitions is applicable and demonstrates a new modern manifestation of such. The case study demonstrates how historical strategies and theories can be adapted to modern sustainable innovation and transitions.

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