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## The Belt and Road Initiative: Perspectives from Asia and Africa

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Katie Stallard,  
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*Dancing on Bones* is a monographic book by the senior editor, China and Global Affairs, at the *New Statesman* magazine and non-resident Wilson Center Global fellow Katie Stallard. This book discusses history and its manipulation focusing on the Chinese, Russian, and North Korean regimes. The book covers up to present days starting from the end of World War II and the moments that have contributed to the current state of these three regimes, namely the myths linked to the rise of the Kim dynasty, and the narratives of victories in China and the Soviet Union. The earlier chapters discuss the importance of having external enemies and exercising continuous power over popular memory to remind citizens of their country's victimization throughout history. The later chapters discuss the potential threats that analyzing history can pose to the political class as opposed to the power of lies, controls, and imposing limits to the public discourse, especially when accompanied by the instrumentalization of the political class's origins. Power and lies are the results of a network of people: starting from the leader they extend to the entire political class and require resources and constituencies that exceed those required to construct a narrative and include further action, namely encouraging and supporting this storyline while repressing dissenting ideas. The ultimate purpose of this volume is to understand the popular narratives promoted by the three

regimes and the action they needed to enforce acceptable discourses and influence historical research and education eventually to further push political goals.

After an introduction set in a post-2014 invaded Crimea, where the author tells a first-hand experience as a journalist interacting with militiamen at the border, the first chapter, titled "Myth", presents the author's experience at the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone to then dive into the lies behind the rise to power of the Kim dynasty. This chapter discusses the dwelling of Kim Il Sung as a member of the anti-Japanese guerrilla in China, his marginal role in the Red Army, and his designation as the (second-choice) future leader of North Korea by the Soviets after he had proven his obedience in the Red Army. The following chapter, "Victory", presents the problems encountered by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when dealing with the legacy of WWII after having replaced the Nationalist regime that negotiated the end of the war. A similar difficulty with this legacy, the chapter continues, happened in Moscow, where Stalin feared sharing the glory of the victory with the soldiers would undermine his power. The next chapter, "Enemies", shows the different approaches undertaken by the political class to present WWII in North Korea, where the end of the conflict is celebrated as 'Liberation Day', how much Kim Il Sung perceived the 1945 'liberation' as an incomplete victory, and his ambitions for reunification and the linked 1950 North Korean offensive. The chapter also introduces the 'twisted narrative' of the war in North Korea and the anti-imperialist sentiments in the country and their presence in China's narrative. The following chapter "Memory" starts with Stalin's death to continue with Khrushchev's "de-Stalinization", the re-drafting of Soviet history to follow with its 're-drafting' under Brezhnev, and the introduction of the myth of the Great Patriotic War. The chapter "Victims" reverts to China to present the Tian'anmen massacre as an example of manipulation of history but also as a first visible 'crack' in the strength of the Communist Party's ideology, the consequent strategy to revamp ideology through alternative methods, and the resulting revamping of World War II as part of the Century of Humiliation narrative. "Truth" discusses Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost (reconstruction and openness) strategies, the demise of the Communist Party in Russia, the birth of the Russian Federation, and the opening out of the archives with the subsequent public acknowledgement of the massacres of the Stalin regime. This chapter also presents the history of Putin as a KGB officer abroad, experiencing the end of the USSR as an insider abroad during the demise of the Soviet Union, an event that would continue to influence him thereafter. The next chapter "Lies" discusses the relevance of keeping history and lies alive through lineage in the case of Kim Jon Il, who became an integral part of the regime's narrative after his father Kim Il Sung passed away, and his respective contribution to North Korean propaganda. The following chapter, "Control", discusses how a regime's use of the past can revamp public support and aid the political class in claiming "the moral high ground". It is set in Russian-occupied Donetsk and presents Putin's vision of reinstating Russia as a great power by using past glory

and heroism to overcome and somehow hide atrocities. The following chapter, "Heroes", presents the legacy of the Kim dynasty as coflowing in Kim Jon Un's figure and his only apparent reforms as a 'modern' dictator. The last chapter, "Patriots", presents the instrumental use of history by Xi Jinping to revamp the CCP ideology in the country, pushed by a "more disciplined" study of history, the new value given to World War II as the "14-year War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression" starting in 1931, with the Japanese invasion of China. The book ends with its conclusion, "Power" which reinforces the initially presented topic of instrumentalizing history at the will and power of the political class.

Structurally, the book intertwines different narratives, comparably to a volume from the genre of the feature stories, which aligns much with the author's journalistic background. The same applies to sources, as the author often relies on various sources to craft the book's narrative: historical facts accompany interviews and personal experiences collected during the author's years as a foreign correspondent for Sky News abroad. The *fil rouge* of this book is its reliance on the central topic of the instrumentalization of history, and rather than presenting it horizontally, considering one regime after the other, or vertically, through a chronological narrative, the volume follows a non-linear structure, much emphasizing the personalities in the discussion and underlying their agency in this process.

The malleability of history and the partial ease shown by the single regimes to shape and form it at their necessity also give, at the very least, implicit points of reflection for readers about the need for free and open history for the development of a free country and democracies in general. This book shows how much agency impacts history and how pliable it can potentially be in the hands of an unruly political class that has the power to shape and form it depending on the requirements of specific circumstances or political agendas.

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